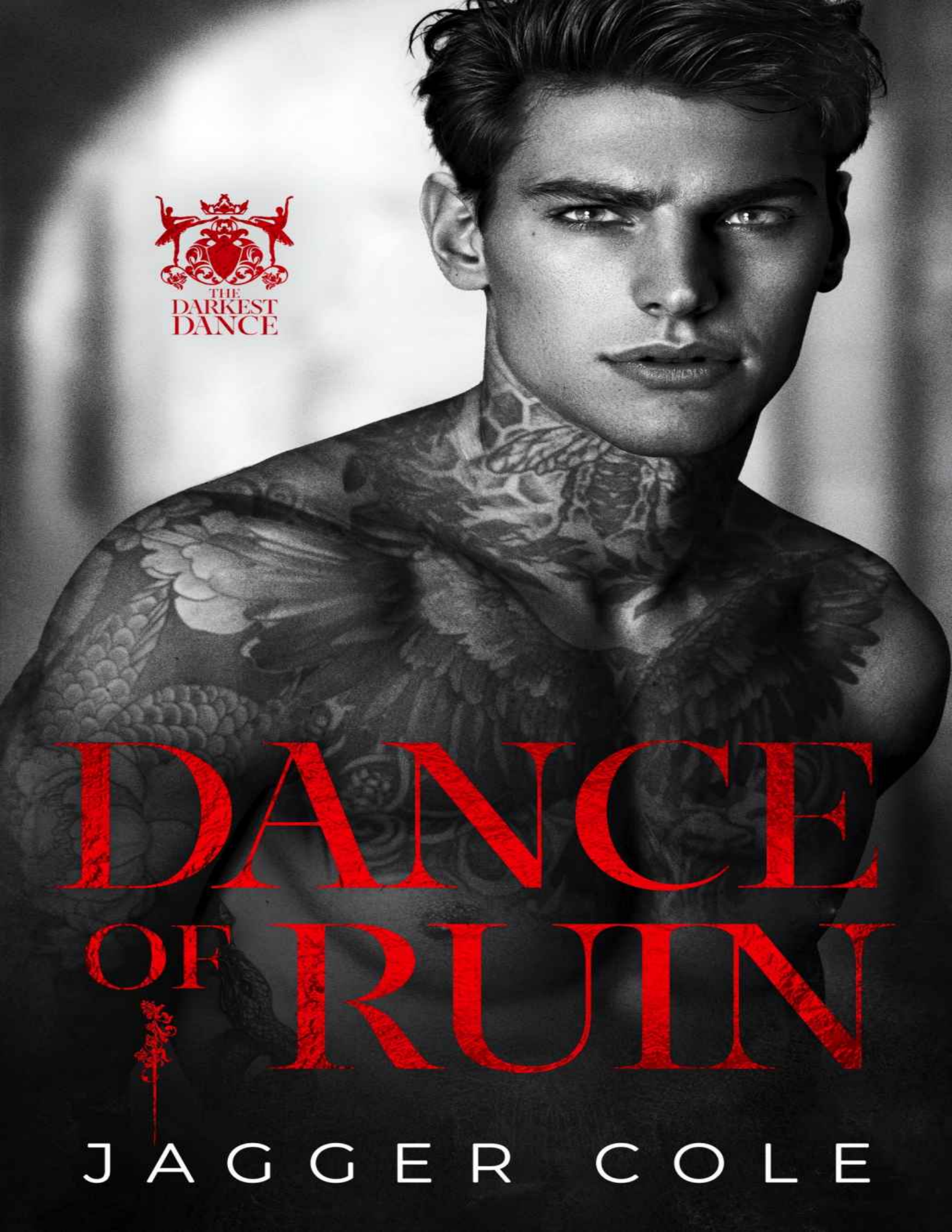
THE
DARKEST
DANCE
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OF
RUIN
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF RUIN

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A DARK ENEMIES TO LOVERS MAFIA ROMANCE

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Do You Feel It? - Chaos Chaos
Deathwish - Alley
Trouble - CRMNL
Black Swan - Victoria Canal
Therapy - VOILÁ
Colors - Halsey
So Real - Jeff Buckley
X - Welshly Arms
Like A Villain - Bad Omens

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book, like many of my books, contains darker, graphic themes. *Dance of Ruin* involves mild BDSM, mild degradation, and praise.

The following triggers are slightly spoiler in nature, so if you have none, feel free to flip past this to the main book.

Dance of Ruin includes a SA as part of the plot (does not involve the MMC), an event that is touched on in chapters 4 and 8, and which is revisited in more detail in chapter 29.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers and limits, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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NAOMI

SOMETIMES, I feel that I was born into the wrong life.

And by “sometimes”, I mean *all the time*.

The situation I currently find myself in is a prime example.

I'm standing in a ballroom so gilded in excess it makes my teeth ache. Crystal chandeliers glitter overhead. The walls are lined with gold filigree and centuries-old paintings meant to impress people with too much money and not enough taste. The clink of champagne glasses fills the air, mixed with the dull, polite murmur of political conversation.

It’s the sort of event I loathe.

But I’m not here for me. I’m here because this is the kind of event my father *thrives* in.

Leonard Kim, U.S. Congressman and career politician, is In. His. *Element*. Parties like this are a drug to him—shaking hands, making promises, spinning current events. And tonight, I’m part of his carefully crafted performance.

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t be anywhere *near* a fundraiser for my father’s campaign coffers, especially not when it’s being hosted by the

“Daughters of the Gilded Era”: a cartoonishly WASPy, stuck-up and snobbish collection of upturned noses and dynastic trust funds.

But then there’s the unfortunate reality of my life as a ballet dancer, which is that ballet isn’t just art—it’s war on the body for those who practice it. And my body is taking a *beating* these days.

Since being cast as Odette and Odile in the production of *Swan Lake* that the Zakharova Ballet is mounting in a few months, I’ve been pushing myself even harder. *I have to*. Personally I think that Madame Kuzmina, our Artistic Director, is *insane* to have cast me in the role of the Swan Queen, which involves playing both the White and the Black Swan, but that's what she's done. So I’ve been putting in tons of grueling overtime with extra practice on top of the hours and hours of rehearsals to make *damn sure* I live up to her expectations.

And all that extra work is destroying my body. Shin splints, tendonitis, stress fractures… You name it.

On the plus side, one of the best dance physios in the country happens to be right here in New York.

On the not-so-plus side, she’s out of network and costs a small freaking fortune every visit. And it’s a *lot* of visits.

Normally I pay my own way, even when my father offers to refill my measly bank account. Dad and I don’t exactly see eye-to-eye, and I’ll be damned if I take his money.

Is that pride biting me in the nose to spite my face?

Yup.

That said, there are extenuating circumstances.

Like Dr. Miravalles draining my meager bank account to zero, and my rent being due soon.

So when Leonard offered me money to accompany him tonight, I said yes. I had to. A single evening of playing his perfect daughter, and I can survive for another month.

And Dad is currently making *damn sure* he gets his money's worth.

"Of course, Naomi is an accomplished dancer," Leonard says smoothly to the couple he's been schmoozing for the past ten minutes, a billionaire philanthropist and his wife who look at me like I'm a particularly well-trained pet. "She's with the Zakharova Ballet."

He keeps his hand lightly on my back, a constant reminder that I'm on display, that I have a role to play—his daughter, his little success story and future protégée.

This isn't him praising me. It's him showing me off like a trophy.

"I'm sure you're very proud of her," the wife says, offering me a kind smile. "The Zakharova is a fine company."

Leonard chuckles, as if the idea of my dancing being a point of pride is adorable. "Yes, it's a wonderful little hobby. Fantastic way to keep fit. But one day, she'll join me in Washington." He turns to flash a nauseatingly fake smile my way. "She has far too sharp a mind to waste it dancing forever."

A hobby. A way to keep fit.

The words feel like a slap, though they don't surprise me. I've been dancing since I was *four*, and not once has Leonard treated it as anything but a phase I'll eventually grow out of. He doesn't see the blood, the exhaustion, the years of my life I've sacrificed on the altar of ballet.

This isn’t something I *do*—it’s who *I am*. He doesn't, and won’t ever, seem to understand that.

I force a smile, curling my fingers around the stem of my champagne glass, trying to keep from snapping the delicate crystal.

“I’ve actually been dancing professionally since I was seventeen,” I smile, tilting my head in faux amusement. “So—not really a hobby,” I try to add as lightly as humanly possible.

Leonard’s grip on my back tightens, a subtle warning.

Play along.

“Of course, sweetheart,” he says. His voice is smooth as silk, but there’s a weight beneath it. “But one day, you’ll want something *real*.”

Something real.

I want to hurl my champagne in his face.

Instead, I do what I always do. Swallow my anger. Let him talk, weaving the narrative that makes him look good and makes *me* look like a silly little girl who will eventually grow up and step into the role Daddy has carved out for me.

Not that I ever will.

“Wasn’t your mother a dancer too?”

This question comes from an older woman who’s just joined the small group.

“Yes,” I say stiffly. “She—”

“Oh, she was a *lovely* dancer,” Leonard interrupts, ever the polished statesman. He says it with a dismissive wave, as if my mother’s entire

career was a passing fancy. “But of course, she left all that behind when we married. A natural transition. A real career is far more fulfilling.”

I glance at the guests around us with their polite smiles, all nodding in agreement.

Before I can stop myself, the words come out sharply. “She wasn’t just a *lovely dancer*. She was a professional who danced with the Joffrey.” I turn to level a defiant look at the woman who asked the question. “Personally, I think it’s a tragedy that she quit at all.”

A beat of silence follows, the kind of awkward pause when someone goes off script.

Leonard’s jaw tenses almost imperceptibly before his oily smile returns. “Of course, sweetheart. She was very…graceful.”

He swiftly redirects the conversation toward safer waters. I stand there, seething, a child in a room full of adults who have decided my opinion doesn’t matter.

A few minutes later, Leonard pulls me aside, his expression neutral but his tone laced with quiet reproach. “Naomi, please. The Daughters of the Gilded Era are always *very* generous to my campaign. That was Delores Cunningham you just mouthed off to, for crying out loud.”

My brows knit in confusion. "Who?"

“The Vice President of the society,” my father mutters through clenched teeth. He exhales through his nose sharply. “Politics is an art too, Naomi. It takes skill to dance through conversations at these sorts of events.”

A slow smile tugs at my lips. “Then I guess I should go practice my steps.”

Before he can reply, I turn and slip away.

I need to get out, just for a moment.

I weave my way through the crowd, offering tight smiles and murmured apologies as I nudge past women draped in designer gowns and men in tailored suits. Leonard is busy schmoozing, securing whatever future he envisions for himself.

It takes me less than a minute to find the hallway. It's quieter here, and the ornate excess of the ballroom fades, replaced by cold marble and sleek, modern architecture. A door marked STAIRS is at the far end, unguarded. I hesitate for only a moment before pushing through.

I start climbing, my heels clicking too loudly against the concrete steps in the silence. At the top, I push open a door to the roof of the building, and the cool night air finally swallows me whole.

New York stretches out glittering before me, and I slowly inhale and exhale as if to purge my lungs of the stuffy gala downstairs. There's not much up here: a few plastic milk crates, a metal bucket of sand stuffed with cigarette butts, a couple of empty beer bottles. But the view is *incredible.*

I grin as I walk over to the edge of the roof. I lean over, daring myself to look down at the cars easily thirty stories beneath me as the wind rushes over my face.

I pull back, and when I glance to the side, my brows perk up in interest. There's a divider wall next to me, as if sectioning off another part of the rooftop, with flowers, leaves, and trailing vines poking out from the other side. When I lean out again, I smile.

It's a whole private garden oasis, walled off on both sides, and it looks *incredible*.

I lean out over the edge again, craning my neck to peek around the wall. There's no lights or anything, and the only way I can see someone would get to it is through another plain, steel, windowless door like the one I just walked out of.

But it just looks *so* peaceful and charming…

Something inside me rebels at the idea of having to slink my way back to that ridiculous party downstairs. I gulp as I eye the narrow ledge that wraps around the edge of the wall. Then I glance down at the city lights twinkling thirty stories below.

This is a supremely stupid idea.

But screw it.

I slip off my heels, my dress swirling around my legs as I step onto the ledge.

My heart instantly climbs up into my throat as I try not to look down. The wind tugs at my hair as I move carefully and deliberately, holding onto the flat edge of the wall, one foot in front of the other. The stone beneath me is cool and solid, but the drop below is endless. My heart pounds, but I keep going.

Finally, I'm on the other side of the divider, and I step down onto solid ground.

I exhale, a slow, steady, triumphant breath.

Made it.

The little garden is quiet, secluded, and seriously *stunning*. Flowers tumble from planters, the air thick with the scent of jasmine. The little lanterns surrounding it are switched off, but a small pond filled with lily pads and

flowering plants gurgles quietly as the little fountain in the middle sprinkles over the surface.

After suffering the last hour downstairs at that gala, it's like pure, peaceful heaven up here. And for a moment, it's *mine*.

I move to the edge, looking out over the city, an endless sea of lights, movement and energy. I could honestly stay here all night, just disappear and let the party below continue without me.

But then I hear voices.

Low, rough, and coming from the other side of the ivy-covered wall opposite the one I just climbed around.

I freeze.

Something about their tones of voice—one sharp with fear, the other smooth but cutting—keeps me rooted to the spot.

I shift silently, slipping closer to the wall. The one I snuck around was solid metal. But this one looks to be older wrought iron, almost entirely choked by ivy. I lean closer, my pulse racing as I press my fingertips against the ironwork and peer through the foliage.

Holy shit.

I *know* the man standing on the other side, a cigarette dangling from his lips, the orange ember casting dramatic shadows across his chiseled face.

Nico Barone, younger brother of Carmine, the new don of the Barone mafia family. But more to the point, Bianca's—who dances in the Zakharova with me—older brother.

Who happens to be *devastatingly* gorgeous in a downright dangerous, bad decision kind of way.

And who I will only privately—*very* privately—admit, blushingly, shamefully, that I've always had a tiny bit of a crush on.

I mean, *come on*. The man is danger and temptation incarnate. Dark hair, tousled just enough to look effortless. Striking, razor-sharp blue eyes, and tattoos that snake down his arms and creep sensually up his neck all the way to his chiseled jawline.

To top it all off, he carries himself with an easy, smug confidence, an almost lazy dominance that makes it impossible to look away.

I have *zero freaking clue* what he's doing up on this roof. But I watch anyway as he and the other man…whom I don't recognize…argue. Well, the other guy is arguing, his face scrunched up and angry. Nico is just casually watching him, taking slow drags on his cigarette.

A chill runs down my spine at the seemingly effortless way Nico seems to hold all the power in this exchange, all while looking completely relaxed.

The other man bares his teeth, his voice angry.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he snarls.

Nico exhales smoke, tilting his head. "Then I'll say it again, slower. Who. The. Fuck. Is. Paying. You."

My fingers clench the ivy and iron as the other man bristles.

"Who I do business with is none of your goddamn concern. We had a deal—"

"I don't do *deals* with little fuckers who are more interested in spying on me and my family than they are in actually *completing* said deal. So why don't we cut the bullshit, and we can skip to the part where you just tell me what I want to—"

“You don’t scare me, Barone,” the other man spits. I can see his throat muscles working, his hands twitching at his sides. “I don’t give a fuck. I know you’re involved in *that fucking club*,” he whispers, his voice fraying at the edges.

Nico stills.

Something shifts in the air. It's subtle, but even I can feel it as surely as if the temperature had dropped.

The man facing Nico definitely feels it, too. He stiffens, chest heaving with the effort of trying to hide his fear. But it’s useless. You can see it in the way his fingers twitch, in the way his breath quickens.

“What club?” Nico asks, his voice silken, but with a sharp edge underneath it that makes my skin prickle. A slow, predatory smile curves his lips.

The man hesitates, clearly regretting opening his mouth.

“The Black Court,” he finally grits out, jaw clenched like he’s bracing for impact.

Nico takes a slow step toward him.

The man’s courage falters, his attempt at defiance crumbling under the sheer weight of Nico’s presence.

Nico keeps advancing.

“And what is that?” His voice is calm, unhurried.

The man stumbles over his words. “N-nothing,” he mumbles. “It’s just a rumor.”

“Well, I’d *very much* like to hear this rumor.”

The smoothness is gone now, his voice dropping deeper and more dangerous.

The man caves, shrinking into himself, his back pressed up against the roof ledge behind him as if he's painfully aware that there's nowhere to run.

Suddenly, I can't breathe.

"Tell me what exactly you heard about this…rumor."

The man shakes his head, as if that will somehow make Nico back off.

Slowly, Nico takes a final drag of his cigarette, plucks it from his lips, then deftly flicks it over the edge, sending it into the cool night air.

He moves quickly, and the man is instantly choking as Nico's fingers wrap around his throat.

I slap a hand over my mouth, stifling a gasp. My heart slams against my ribs.

"Tell me what you heard," Nico murmurs, his tone disturbingly quiet, like he's done this a thousand times before.

The man chokes, his hands clawing frantically at Nico's wrist.

"The—The Black Court," he bleats, his voice strangled. "Everyone knows it's out there!"

Nico doesn't move, doesn't even *blink*.

"And?"

The man's Adam's apple bobs up and down. "And…" His voice is barely more than a rasping whisper now. "And you're part of it."

There's a beat.

Then Nico exhales a quiet sigh, glancing past the man and over the edge of the building. His fingers tighten just slightly, and the man lets out a strangled wheeze.

“Such a shame,” Nico says thoughtfully, dragging his gaze back to the man.

“Wh—what is?” the man gasps.

Nico’s lips curl slightly. “That you don’t have wings.”

Then, without hesitation, he shoves the man over the ledge.

I bite back a scream, my entire body going rigid as I hear the faint, fading sound of a strangled cry and the sickening silence that follows.

I whirl, heart hammering wildly against my chest.

I have to get out of here.

I lurch up onto the narrow ledge and start to cat-walk back around to the other side of the metal wall. My bare feet grip the cool stone beneath them, every muscle in my body trembling as I rapidly inch my way around.

Suddenly, my foot slips.

My brain short-circuits.

The world lurches.

Pure, blind terror rips through me as gravity wraps me in its grip and yanks me sideways off the ledge.

I drop, my stomach bottoming out, my pulse screaming in my ears.

…And then suddenly, I come to a jarring stop.

My breath chokes raggedly from my throat, my eyes wide as my gaze snaps to a strong, tattooed hand wrapped firmly around my wrist.

My body jerks violently, my heart stuttering in my chest as I dangle in mid-air.

My gaze drags higher, over the tattooed hand, the muscled, rippling, inked forearm…

…Right up into Nico's steely eyes—blue, piercing, and *amused*—as he holds me dangling thirty stories above New York.

His fingers tighten around my wrist, strong and unyielding, and for a second, I honestly don't know if he's going to pull me up, or let me fall.

A slow, knowing smirk curves his lips.

"Well, well, little ballerina," he growls quietly. "It looks like *you* don't have wings either."

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NAOMI

MY ENTIRE BODY JANGLES. My breath is ragged and uneven, my blood hammering so hard through my veins that I swear I can hear it. But I don't move.

Nico still has my wrist.

And he hasn't pulled me up yet.

For a long, endless moment I dangle there, thirty stories of *nothing* below me. His grip is firm—solid, unshakable—but he doesn't make any move to get me to safety. Instead, he just…watches me.

His sharp blue eyes flick over my face, peering at me. Like I'm a puzzle he hadn't expected to stumble upon tonight that he's now trying to unravel. A slow smirk curls the corners of his mouth, as if he finds this entire situation mildly amusing.

My stomach clenches, ice slithering up my spine as I drink in the slightly impassive way he looks at me.

Just as I'm about to open my mouth and beg, his arms flex, and I gasp as he yanks me up in one swift, effortless motion.

The rooftop slams beneath my palms as I collapse forward, gasping. My knees scrape on the cold stone and my dress catches on the rough surface.

I blink, shaking as I drag my gaze up, realizing that I'm back on the part of the roof that I first walked out onto.

"Technically, sneaking onto private terraces is breaking and entering, you know."

His voice is low. Almost sensual. And yet, it's not flirtatious. It's more like a warning, etched into skin.

I shiver, clambering to my feet and turning to him. Nico stands on the ledge with the city behind him, casually leaning with one shoulder against the wall, ankles crossed and arms folded over his broad chest.

He's in dark jeans, black t-shirt, and a leather jacket—the sleeves tugged up a little to display the ink swirling down his forearms. Another swath of it creeps up his neck all the way to his chiseled jawline.

His dark hair is short on the sides and slicked to the side and slightly back on top, and I find myself swallowing nervously as those piercing eyes bore into me.

"And *that's* a crime," he murmurs, an almost amused lilt to his tone.

My throat bobs. "Last time I checked, so is—"

What. The. *HELL*. Self!?

I clamp my mouth shut before the truly insane shit I was about to say—out loud, to *this* man, of all people—comes tumbling out.

So is murder.

I’m not fast enough. The air turns a little chillier as his brow cocks. A low hum tingles over my skin when he unfolds his arms and slowly steps down off the ledge, a jungle cat slinking out of a tree in the darkness. A jaguar sniffing out his prey.

“You were saying…?”

The words fall from his lips in that same near-sensual tone. And yet there’s nothing sexy or charming about the look on his face, or the dark gleam in his eye.

“Nothing.” My throat works as I shrug and take a step back from him.

“I—I wasn’t saying any—”

Nico takes one more step toward me.

“Mmm, it *really* sounded like you were about to say something.”

I suck my lips in on themselves, teeth pressing over the soft flesh as my pulse pounds.

“I—I was at the party, downstairs. My father—”

“I know who you are, Naomi,” he growls quietly.

He takes another step toward me.

He knows who I am.

For a second, there’s this truly insane, cringey schoolgirl feeling inside me. It’s not like we’ve ever hung out—not really. But we’ve seen each other in passing since I'm close friends with his younger sister, Bianca.

But the Nico I’m face to face with now is not “Bianca’s older brother”. He’s not even “one of Vito Barone’s sons, second only to Carmine in the entire Barone mafia family.”

Right now, between the dark, sharp shadows of his face backlit by the neon of the city, the cold glint in his unblinking eyes, and the way his jaw tightens as he prowls menacingly toward me, he's not anything *close* to something or someone I know.

He barely even looks human as the darkness surges behind his face, misting off his skin like black smoke.

Nico takes another slow, predatory step toward me. I move back again, and he slides to his right, like he's trying to get around me. I sidestep as well, keeping him dead center in my field of vision, rotating slightly, stepping back again when he steps forward, maintaining the distance between us.

"Are you scared of me, Naomi?"

Icy coldness teases over my skin and finger-walks down my spine.

"Should I be?" I whisper.

Yes.

Yes, you should. You just watched him murder someone.

The thought clings to me, digging its claws into my skin. I know what I just witnessed. But when it happened literally in front of me, some kind of self-preservation instinct took over, urging me to run away before he could see me.

Except… He did.

And now I'm alone on a dark roof with a man with a dangerous glint in his eyes who's just proven that he's more than willing to *push people* from said roof.

Our slow dance continues. He moves to his right, I rotate to mine, keeping him dead center. He advances toward me, I retreat, not taking my eyes off

him for a second.

It’s not until something cold and solid hits the small of my back that I flinch awake from the dark spell he’s cast over me. I jolt, my gaze on him breaking as I glance behind me.

Shit.

I was so focused on keeping him in my center field of vision—as if he’s a lion stalking out of the savanna grass toward me—that I lost track of my positioning.

Nico wasn’t trying to outflank me. He was trying to *turn* me, knowing I’d keep backing away from him as he advanced. Which means now, I’m pinned against the very ledge of the roof I almost just fell from…and he’s *still* advancing on me.

Quite suddenly, I find myself frozen as he melts from the shadows into my personal space, looming over me, a menacing aura swirling around us like black fog.

He’s too close.

The scent of tobacco smoke, leather, and dark, lethal masculinity fills my lungs. For a ridiculous second, I think that if danger had a scent, it would smell like him.

Nico’s blue eyes pierce the swirling blackness around us, cutting into my core as I tense against the stone behind me. I’m suddenly much more aware of everything around me—the chill in the air, the slightly worn surface of the stone ledge pressing against me, the distant noise of the city below me.

Danger incarnate, cocking his head to the side and studying me. Appraising me.

Judging my fate.

“Because we know each other,” he growls quietly, “why don’t we spare each other the embarrassment of lying to one another’s faces.”

A cold shiver ripples up my spine as he moves even closer, so close that his body is pressed to mine, literally pinning me to the ledge behind me.

“What did you see.”

I swallow uncomfortably. My pulse thuds like doom in my veins.

He knows me. I’m friends with his sister. He wouldn’t just KILL me.

My insides curdle.

Right?

“If I wanted to kill you,” he murmurs quietly—like that cold blue gaze is capable of penetrating my skull and reading my very thoughts—“the opportune moment would have been when I had you dangling over thin air, wouldn’t it?” His lips curl, like he’s amused by the idea. “I wouldn't have needed to do a thing, actually. I could have just watched you fall.” His smile widens.

What is he, deranged?

“Funny, I thought ballerinas were supposed to be graceful.”

“We can’t *fly*,” I mumble.

“You know, when we were kids and Bianca first started taking ballet, I used to think that the tutus acted like parachutes.”

This entire scenario feels like a fever dream.

I’ve just watched this man kill someone. Then he saves me from falling, even though I saw what he did, and he knows it. And now we’re talking about…parachute tutus?

Nico’s brows knit. “Although thinking about it now, I’m guessing that was probably something I saw in a cartoon.”

A cold shiver creeps up my spine as I swallow the dryness in my mouth.

“Nico…” I say quietly, fear still rampaging through my veins.

“Hmm?”

“What are we doing?” I whisper.

He doesn’t respond instantly. Instead, he lets his lips curl a little, as if he’s about to smile.

But he doesn’t, and that “almost-a-smile” stays where it is, a slightly off-kilter, somewhat deranged thin line.

And there’s *nothing* smiley about his eyes.

“We were discussing what you, unfortunately, appear to have seen just now.”

My head shakes automatically. “I didn’t—”

I gasp sharply, adrenaline spiking through my system as his hand suddenly wraps around my throat.

And *squeezes*.

“I thought we’d decided *not to lie* to each other, Naomi.”

He sighs, rolling his neck, making the tattoo ink there flex in the neon light of the city.

“So, we can agree that you saw what you saw.”

I tense.

“Acknowledging that I could have let you go, or merely not done a thing to *stop you* from falling three and a half minutes ago, and yet here you stand—you’re welcome, by the way…”

I frown, a jangling symphony of emotions and firing synapses clashing inside me.

“I—yeah, thank you,” I mutter.

“You can *thank me* by looking me in the eye and telling me what you saw.”

My body stiffens, my pulse skipping a beat as my throat tightens even without his hand squeezing any tighter.

“*Naomi*.”

“I…”

“*Say it,*” he murmurs darkly, that weirdly sensual tone drifting over my skin like a dark caress.

“I saw you…”

“Saw me…what?” he pushes.

I shake my head, then close my eyes, taking a shaky breath.

“*I saw you push him*,” I half-whisper. “That man.”

Silence. I feel my skin pebble from the chill as I slowly open my eyes.

Jesus.

I almost flinch at the intense way he’s looking at me, his blue eyes flaying me open like a science experiment.

“Good girl.”

I make an immediate choice not to acknowledge the tightening sensation I feel in my core when he says that.

“Now, was that so hard?” Nico smirks.

I feel my pulse skip again as I shake my head.

“And now, my little ballerina friend, I’d like to know what you *heard*.”

My chest constricts. I should have known this would be the next question.

“Nothing,” I lie.

He chuckles, low and dark. “You’re funny.”

“And you’re terrifying,” I whisper back.

Nico grins. And scariest part about it is that it’s *totally and completely genuine*.

Now, with his hand around my throat, pinning me to the ledge, and with the neon abyss behind me.

He’s *grinning*.

I tense as his gaze drops. I follow it, looking down at my elbow. There's a thin line of blood from where I scraped it on the stone when I slipped.

Before I can react, he reaches down and swipes his thumb over the cut, collecting a small smear of blood on his fingertip. Then he lifts his hand slowly, bringing it up between us, his eyes locked on mine as his tongue flicks out and drags across his finger in one slow, deliberate motion.

My breath stutters and a shiver moves through me, something foreign and indescribable twisting in my stomach.

Then, without another word, his hand drops from my throat. His eyes level one more piercing stab into mine before he suddenly turns and starts to walk away through the shadows, back toward the door to the stairs.

“Wait…” It tumbles out before I can stop myself.

He half-turns, the lights of the city casting strange shadows across his face.

“How do I know you’re not going to kill me?” My voice barely makes it out of my throat. “I mean…later.”

Nico chuckles softly, shaking his head. “You don’t.”

And then he turns completely, walks over, and steps back into the light of the stairwell, letting the door click shut behind him.

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THE RAVEN

I'VE SPENT most of my life being told I'm smart. Often, that's been preceded by the word "too" and followed by with the words "for your own good".

I'm inclined to agree.

Being smart comes with perks, of course—lots of them, especially if you've got the social skills to back up that intelligence. Being relatively sure you're the brightest person in any room you walk into opens up a slew of possibilities. It's like when Neo in *The Matrix* starts seeing "the world" as the code it really is.

I know. It sounds *incredibly* narcissistic, comparing yourself to the savior/Christ figure in a film. But it's not narcissism. It's just fact. Although I've been called a "narcissist" for merely being *aware* that I'm a lot fucking smarter than most people often enough that I had myself assessed.

…Nope. *Not* a narcissist.

Just smart, with a healthy dose of cocky fucker and a few Machiavellian tendencies sprinkled on top.

I can’t help it. It’s not that I’m looking to stir up shit. I just get supremely *bored* with the world as it is, and without the string-pulling or the shit-stirring, that boredom can become overwhelming.

Back in high school, being the way I am got me into trouble. Again, not because I went looking for it, but because everyone around me—teachers included—had their walls up around me, thinking my intelligence meant I would know their thoughts or be able to unearth their darkest secrets.

I mean, *it does*, but not because I can read minds. I can read *people*.

So, I got bored. And when I get bored, I start…toying with things. Influencing people. Interweaving lies with just enough truth to be *very* convincing, and then seeing how far I can take those lies.

Luckily, high school was quick, because I skipped two grades. That meant I could go to Knightsblood University while Carmine, my older brother, was still there.

Now, high school might have been afraid of my brain and its weird mental lockpicking abilities. Knightsblood, on the other hand—the notorious “Ivy League School of the Mafia world”—welcomed me with open arms.

And it’s at Knightsblood that all *this* began.

The Black Court.

From where I sit, sprawled on an elegant leather couch, I watch as the hedonism unfolds around me.

The music pulses low and dark—a slow, hypnotic rhythm that thrums through the cavernous underground cathedral. The air is heavy with the swirling scent of perfume, smoke, whiskey and sweat, the hum of pleasure-laced laughter blending seamlessly with the sensual movements of the

people—mostly women—around me. Bodies writhe in the golden candlelight, all bare skin and silk. Pure temptation.

I grin beneath the mask covering my face as I breathe it all in.

The Black Court isn’t in session tonight. There’s no trial, no judgment, no execution.

Tonight, the five of us are merely meeting. But a Court meeting—whether it’s more of a check-in, like tonight, or something grander, like a trial itself—means the whole hedonistic, bacchanalian show.

That’s another thing about being the smartest person in the room and having the energy to match it: I fucking *crave* shit like this.

The excess. The stimuli. There's a roaring, deranged *NEED* for mayhem, violence, and chaos that is always with me, grinning like a madman over my shoulder from the back seat.

I call him my dark shadow.

It’s not psychosis. I’m *not* crazy. I mean, I frequently act like I am, but on a diagnosable level? No. Carmine, on the other hand… Well, I don’t think you need to be a board-certified psychiatrist to see my brother is wired differently.

I glance across the room to where he’s sitting by himself, just outside the revelry, a moody little emo fuck staring at his phone.

Granted, if I what *he* had waiting for him back home, I wouldn't be interested in the bevy of gorgeous, half-naked women laughing and giggling their way around the party either. Maybe once upon a time, Carmine would have been indulging—at least begrudgingly, because, see above, moody little emo fuck. And woe betide whatever girl who was foolish enough to give *his* brand of crazy a spin.

But Carmine is a married man now, and I'm guessing the woman responsible for smoothing out some of his rougher edges is the reason he keeps staring at his phone. I'm also guessing if he wasn't wearing his Hound mask right now I'd be rolling my eyes at the nauseating grin on his face as he texts her.

A shrill giggle pulls my attention across the room, to where another of our group lounges on a couch similar to mine, a leggy brunette sitting on his knee and running her fingers over the edge of his Wolf mask.

…*Speaking of* diagnosable sociopaths…

The Wolf, despite being masked, is clearly watching the girl on his knee like a predator contemplating his next kill. He's not even touching her—his arms are draped over the back of the couch behind him. But you can see the tattooed fingers of both hands tap-tap-tapping in a manic, unhinged staccato that hints at the beast prowling inside of him. A hungry animal that doesn't distinguish between pleasure and pain.

Yeah, good luck, sweetheart, I think to myself as I shift my gaze back to the girl giggling on his lap.

Five of us, and two are certifiably insane lunatics.

Not great odds. But, hey, it works.

I turn to glance over at The Bull and chuckle silently. He's the exact opposite of Carmine right now. Three women are winding themselves around him, draping their bodies over his broad, muscled shoulders and lap, whispering into his ear, tracing fingers over biceps that strain the physical limits of his white linen dress shirt.

And the motherfucker looks *bored*. Disinterested. His fingers idly trace over the exposed thigh of the blonde curled against his side, but he's

simultaneously scrolling mindlessly on his phone.

Typical. Dude has *issues*.

My attention next turns to The Stag, who is currently doing a great job of mimicking Carmine's aloof, emo sulky-boy aesthetic. He's off by himself, which isn't unusual. Same as The Bull, he's got a small handful of female admirers half-crawling all over him.

Whom he's pointedly ignoring. Not like The Bull, scrolling his fucking Instagram or whatever. No, The Stag is just sitting there looking straight ahead, shoulders squared, hands relaxed at his sides, like the fucker is meditating or something.

Okay, scratch that, we might actually have *three* certified looney-toons in our midst. But I don't think The Stag is the same as The Wolf or my brother.

He's genuinely something even more fucked up. I'm just not quite sure what.

"You look bored."

I slowly pull my attention from The Stag and the rest of my friends to look up at the two women standing in front of me: masked, gorgeous, and wearing slinky dresses transparent enough to show both the shade of their nipples—one light pink, the other dusty rose—and their personal tastes in body grooming—one shaved, the other with a little heart on top.

How adorable.

"That would be because I *am*," I say lazily, not really looking at them.

"Well…" Pink Nips, Heart Bush blushes coyly. "Maybe we could help with that."

I nod slowly, lifting a shoulder as I drag my attention back to them "Maybe."

Hope glitters in their eyes.

"First, answer me this: you're locked in a cell. The floor is dirt, and there's just one window, but it's too high to reach. You've got no food or water, but there *is* a shovel. However, you've only got two days before you die of thirst, and you can't dig a tunnel because you'll die of dehydration before you ever get out. How do you escape?"

They both stare at me for a second.

"I'm…confused," Dark Nips, Bare Pussy says. Her voice shows it. "You want to put us in a cage?"

My brows shoot up. "How the *fuck* did you get that from what I said?"

"You said there was a cell—"

"It's a *riddle*. How do you get out."

The first one taps a manicured finger against her filler-plumped lips. "Oh! You dig a tunnel!"

Jesus fucking Christ.

"He said there's not enough *water* to dig a tunnel," the second one quietly admonishes.

"Why would you need water to dig?"

"Lightning round is over," I grunt, standing and pushing past them. "I'd recommend The Bull, or if you don't mind a little bruising, The Wolf or The Stag."

I can feel their confused gazes on me as I head to the bar.

You use the shovel to dig up the dirt floor and make a pile of it to stand on, so you can reach the window.

I mean, *fuck*.

At the bar, I pour myself a drink. But I end up just staring into my glass, frowning, shaking my head.

What the fuck was that?

I *should* be indulging. That's part of the game, part of how I keep my edge sharp. Who the fuck cares if they were Mensa members. Or, you know, capable of solving a riddle that shouldn't be beyond a nine-year-old kid.

It's not like I was recruiting them for a fucking think tank.

I glare into my drink. For a second, I consider going back over there and trying the game with someone else. But then my mind drifts back to the rooftop last night. To the girl with the trembling lips. With the wild, staccato pulse in her neck beneath my grip. With the wide, shocked eyes when I licked her blood off my finger.

Like I said, I'm not a psychopath. I wasn't going to just let her fall.

But part of the game is letting people think that I *might*.

Is it regrettable that she saw what she did last night? Obviously. And yes, it's worse because she and my sister dance together. It would be *much* better if she were some rando.

But I know Naomi won't talk. For one, she's too…*rigid*. I don't know her well. Not at all, really. But I know enough about her to know that girl is wound up tighter than Carmine's ass when you make a joke about Lyra leaving him—which, for the record, is not advised.

Trust me and what I'm pretty sure is a hairline crack in one of my ribs.

Naomi’s beyond “good”. She’s so “good” that I *know* she’s willing to keep quiet, even if what she saw was a crime. In her mind, a personal direction to her is more important than right and wrong.

No, she won’t say shit. And even if she did, I have an alibi for last night. The rooftop was dark, the city loud. There are no cameras up there. People disappear all the time.

Just the same, I’ll need to remind her at least once more not to mention what she saw. I’ll be subtle—maybe a dead rat nailed to her door with the words “snitches get stitches” written in rat blood.

What? A flair for the dramatic is a sign of a sharp mind. And again, I’m *not* fucking psychotic. Pretending to be one always gets your point across, though.

Plus, it’s just plain fucking *fun*.

But as I swirl the whiskey in my glass, I’m not thinking about nailing rodents to Naomi’s apartment door. Not really.

I’m thinking about her parted lips, and the way her breath caught when I licked her blood off my finger.

“Raven.”

My thoughts scatter as I turn, spotting the rest of them headed for the door to the inner sanctum of our world down here.

The Bull nods his chin at me. “We’re going in.”

I nod back, knocking back another sip from my glass before following the rest of them into the room that we and *only* we ever enter.

The music and laughter from the party fade away as we step through the door, leaving the debauchery behind.

Five chairs around a circular table in the center of the chamber. No throne. No head of the table. All of us, equals.

Five Shadow Kings, like it’s been since day one.

We take our seats, all still masked. The Hound, my brother, leans back, tracing a finger around the rim of his whiskey glass. The Bull stretches his huge frame out, rolling his muscled neck, and The Wolf leans forward, elbows braced on the table and hands clasped like he’s seconds away from snapping someone’s neck. The Stag nods silently as he takes his seat at the same time I do, both of us reaching into pockets for cigarettes. He gets his lit first and then tosses me his lighter, which I use with a nod of thanks and then throw back his way.

I exhale a slow plume of smoke as Carmine clears his throat. “Let’s talk about it.”

By “it”, he means the fact that someone’s been poking around the Court.

This isn’t anything new, of course. There’ve always been whispers about us and the vigilante justice we mete out. Rumors like that spark all sorts of interest, so it’s not unheard of to have people trying to sneak their way into our world, if only out of sheer curiosity.

But something feels different this time. This isn’t someone merely poking at a rumor. Over the last couple of months, it’s felt more like there’s a concentrated effort to test our boundaries and probe for any weakness. It feels *very* purposeful. Very orchestrated.

“They’re methodical,” The Stag growls quietly, taking a drag of his smoke. “Whoever they are, they're not just sniffing around for shits and giggles. They’re looking for cracks.”

My brother leans back. “Do we think it’s Kir?”

The table goes quiet for a moment.

Kir Nikolayev, head of the Nikolayev Bratva, is *exactly* the kind of person who would have a bone to pick with the Black Court. Kir's old-school Bratva, the kind of man who believes in the traditional way of doing things. A lot of the old guard is like that—even the fathers of some of the men in this room.

The Black Court doesn't play by the rules of the old world. We judge criminals who should have been judged by their own people and take justice into our own hands.

And Kir in particular has made it *abundantly* clear he doesn't like that.

But Kir's the easy answer. Too easy.

"I don't think it's Kir," I say.

The Wolf drums his fingers on the thick wooden tabletop. "Why not?" he grunts.

I tap the ash from my cigarette. "Kir doesn't play games like this." I glance over at Carmine sitting next to me, still wearing his Hound mask. "Not now that we've got the friction out in the open. He knows about us, we know about him. For now, I think it's a stalemate."

Carmine nods slowly. "I'm inclined to agree. Kir's a motherfucker, but he's a motherfucker who comes at you and sticks a gun in your face, he doesn't skulk around in the shadows. It's not his style."

The Stag watches me carefully. "That lead of yours last night. How'd that go?"

I grimace before I slowly take a drag on my smoke.

Last night's meetup with Omar was supposed to give us an insight to the people…or person…who might be prying into the Black Court. I have a whole network of underworld "connections" or "little birds" throughout the city, and I'd heard from more than one of them that this guy Omar had been mouthing off in a couple of bars about his dickhead boss being "on the hunt for the Black Court".

That's why I arranged a meet: to figure out if this guy was full of shit, or if he really was an employee of the person who might be trying to dig into our secrets.

Turns out, Omar *was* full of shit. He also overplayed his hand.

"*If you were this interested in meeting me, then that means you're worried about what me and my crew might already know about your little club.*"

Pro tip, Omar: don't drop the only ace up your sleeve when you're alone on a rooftop with someone like *me*.

I clear my throat. "The meet was a dead end."

"How dead?" Carmine asks dryly.

I exhale smoke, lips curling. "The kind where you'd need a shovel to scrape it off 7th Avenue."

The Bull chuckles, shaking his head. "That good, huh?"

I shrug. "The whole thing was a setup to see if we'd react to someone like him mouthing off about his boss digging into us. And we did. I walked right fucking into it." I frown, rapping my knuckles on the table. "But then he overplayed his hand, so I took care of it."

The Wolf laughs darkly. "Good. Motherfucker got what he deserved."

I lean back, stretching out my legs. “But it means whoever’s looking for us is getting bolder. More deliberate.”

Carmine’s mask turns toward me, and I glance over at him.

“Yes?”

“We can assume there were no witnesses?”

I roll my eyes. “You were more fun before you became don.”

Carmine slowly raises a middle finger.

“*No*,” I continue dryly. “There were no witnesses.”

I don’t know why I lie.

But it stays there, hanging in the air between us before I look away.

The Stag clears his throat, his voice a low, gravel rumble. “For now, I say we all double down on security until we figure out if this is Kir or someone else.”

The Hound nods. “Agreed.”

The Wolf cracks his knuckles, something unhinged sparking in his eyes. “Next time we’re exploring possible leaks, I call dibs on having some fun.”

I grin. The Wolf would eat someone *alive* if we let him.

The meeting moves on, shifting to other business, but my mind drifts.

Not to the dead man from last night, or the looming threat of whoever’s hunting for us.

To her.

Naomi fucking Kim.

I frown, rubbing my thumb along the rim of my glass.

It’s nothing. *She’s* nothing.

She saw something she shouldn’t have, but she's too smart to talk.

And if she *was* thinking about saying something? I’ll make sure she thinks twice. Fear is a powerful motivator.

Still… I close my eyes, exhaling through my nose.

The memory of her tastes like smoke and blood and something else I can't put a name to.

I don’t fucking like it.

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NAOMI

"YOU'RE FUNNY."

"And you're terrifying,"

The words creep into my subconscious as I emerge from Washington Square subway station and start walking down Waverly Place.

Maybe that's the wrong way to put it. Saying they "creep into" my head suggests that they weren't already there, which is a lie. That's *exactly* where they've been for the last two days: firmly stuck in both my subconscious *and* my very conscious thoughts.

All I can think about is the dark rooftop. The city below me. The man's scream as he fell. The way Nico's fingers locked around my wrist, keeping me from the same fate.

He pushed a man to his death, and then he saved me.

I keep circling back to that: he killed one person and saved another *in the span of thirty seconds*.

My pulse flutters when I think about the way he looked at me. Not just that, but the way it *felt* to have him looking at me like that—his gaze dark, unreadable.

Dangerous.

Alluring.

Alluring enough to make me keep thinking about him and his piercing eyes, not that I witnessed him kill a man immediately before.

Which might be a strong indication that something is *seriously* wrong with me.

Milena teases me all the time, saying I'm too uptight. Too focused on everything but myself and "my needs".

I feel my face heat just thinking about it.

In cruder terms—Milena's *exact* terms—"You need to get laid".

Easy enough for Milena, one of my best friends in the world, who dances in the Zakharova with me, to say. She's freaking *gorgeous*. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and the girl won the damn genetic lottery with everything from her skin to her nose to her legs to…okay, *all* of her.

She's also effortlessly cool, knows how to be sexy, and doesn't take shit from anyone. Ever.

I mean, yeah, she's Bratva royalty, so I guess that comes with the territory. But still. If you look like Milena, and act like Milena, and carry yourself like Milena, it seems to me that it's a bit easier to just "go get laid".

It's harder when you're me. Short, limp-haired, anxiety-ridden, chronic imposter syndrome, and definitely not mafia royalty.

Never "gone out and gotten laid before", either, if we're keeping score.

I shake myself, forcing my thoughts back to the present. I need to stop thinking about him. About that night.

It’s just another memory.

Ideally, it wouldn’t even be that, just something I surgically erase from my thoughts, like Jim Carrey in *Eternal Sunshine Of the Spotless Mind*. But since that’s never going to happen, it’s going to stay buried in the very back of my mind. Where. It. Belongs.

I didn’t see anything.

Didn’t hear anything.

Didn’t *witness* anything…certainly not a crime.

I want to tell myself that this is a choice I’m making entirely myself. Maybe I am, in part. But a lot of it has to do with *him*.

Whether I want to admit it or not, he scared the *shit* out of me the other night.

“How do I know you’re not going to kill me? I mean…later.”

“You don’t.”

I'd love to tell myself that he was obviously just trying to scare me. But that starts to take on water *real quick* when I remember that he literally killed someone mere minutes before.

I take a shaky breath and try to clear my mind as I head down West 10th Street into the heart of the West Village and to the studio address on the card in my pocket.

For the gazillionth time, I ask myself if I’m crazy—although at least this time the question doesn’t pop up because I got all fangirly over a fucking *murderer* putting his hand on my neck—yeah, good job, self, you freaking weirdo.

No, it’s because I can’t believe I agreed to this photoshoot at all.

I’d been standing in the produce section at the grocery store a week ago staring at the bananas when he approached me—early forties, a dusting of silver in his hair, thick-framed glasses. He looked like every other artsy New Yorker I’ve ever seen, dressed in an all-black ensemble that screamed *coffeehouse intellectual*.

He told me his name was Gus, glanced at the ballet tights visible under my hoodie and skirt, and asked if I was a dancer. My guard went up instantly, but I’d nodded anyway.

He told me he was working on a photography book—*Young Artists of New York*—and that he was supposed to shoot a ballerina the next day, but she had backed out last minute.

I was flattered when he told me he thought I was perfect for the shoot. But what truly hooked my attention was that he was willing to pay me five hundred bucks for an hour of my time.

“Nothing lewd or provocative, naturally,” he’d been sure to clarify. “It’s not even necessarily about the female form. I want to capture the athleticism in your art. And my assistant will be there the whole time.”

He showed me his Insta, which looked legit. That, plus the money? Hi, *sold*.

Landlords in this city don’t care if you’re a starving artist. Neither does my body, and those visits to Dr. Miravalles are draining whatever savings I had.

And, as previously mentioned, I do *not* ask my father for handouts.

So now here I am, walking through the West Village, dressed in simple leggings and an oversized sweater, my hair swept up in a loose bun. I wasn’t nervous when I left my apartment, but the closer I get to the studio, the more I start to question myself.

A text buzzes in my pocket. I fish out my phone, half-hoping it’s an excuse to turn around, but it’s just Milena.

MILENA

We still on for food and drinks tomorrow?

I stare at the message, debating what to say. I didn't tell her about the shoot before, I don’t know why, but now it feels too late. Like saying it out loud will make it sound as sketchy as…well…as it sounds.

ME

HELL yes. Sake and sushi?

MILENA

This is why we’re friends, lol. Fuck yeah. Let’s order a stupid amount of rolls.

I grin, tucking my phone away as I reach the address and look up at the building.

Okay, it’s totally normal-looking. Actually, it’s one of the nicer brownstones on the street, which is seriously saying something given how ritzy the West Village is. I exhale, relaxing a little.

I’ve watched too many true crime documentaries. This is totally fine. I also tend to have a really good instinct about people, and Gus seemed completely normal. And it’s not like the guy accosted me in a dark alley to tell me he wanted to photograph me. It was broad daylight in the produce section, for crying out loud.

“Yes?” A voice crackles when I buzz the number he gave me.

“Gus? It’s Naomi?”

“Oh, good! Come on up! We’re all ready for you.”

A moment later, the door unlocks with a mechanical click, and I step inside, climbing a set of stairs that creak beneath my feet. The building is definitely an artists' space, each floor divided into two apartments with names on the doors like “Celine Rios Ceramics”, another photography studio, and a few painters.

At the top, there’s just one door, standing ajar, with a plaque reading “Gus Carson Studio” affixed to it.

My brows arch in surprise when I step inside. The studio is *way* bigger than I expected, with a backdrop already set up against one wall and Softbox lights glowing warmly. A bunch of photography equipment is scattered about, and there's a table stacked with books and cameras.

Gus looks up from adjusting a tripod, smiling when he sees me.

“There she is!”

His enthusiasm feels a little different now that I’m here, alone in his space. Maybe it’s just nerves.

I force a smile. “Thanks again for having me.”

“My pleasure,” he says easily, motioning to a clothing rack off to the side. “I borrowed these from a costume designer friend. I’d love some with you in the traditional tutu, of course. But there’s also a couple of salsa-style dresses I thought we could play with?”

I nod, glancing around the huge apartment. Gus clearly lives here, too. Half of it is his studio, the other half a huge open-concept loft space, with a kitchen area, a tastefully modern living room, and a bed in one corner. I blush when I notice the camera on a tripod facing the bed.

Gus laughs a little awkwardly when he sees where my gaze is. “Oh, sorry. Don’t mind that. My boyfriend is a *content creator*.” He rolls his eyes,

“OnlyFans. It’s weird, but the money is *stupid* good.”

Not gonna lie, “boyfriend” definitely has my shoulders relaxing a little.

This is all totally fine. I’ll do the shoot, and I’ll be five hundred dollars richer.

“You can go ahead and change in there.” Gus nods toward a curtained-off corner near the photography backdrop. “Pick whatever fits you from the rack.”

I groan, blushing. “I actually…brought my own? I know, it’s a little extra…”

Gus chuckles. “No, that’s perfect. I meant to ask you to do that anyway and I forgot. So much more authentic. We shot this guy earlier this week who brought over his entire oil painting setup. Made a fucking mess, but I *loved it*,” he laughs, his eyes twinkling.

He turns and starts busying himself with one of the cameras laid out on the table. Meanwhile, I take my bag into the changing area and start pulling out my tights and one of my practice tutus. I pause, grinning when my touch lingers on the paperback libretto of *Swan Lake.*

This was my mother’s—a tattered, well-loved “little book” of the performance script for the infamous 1895 production of the ballet. She used it as a study guide when she was a *cygnet* in a production, and it’s got all of her meticulous little notes in blue pen in the margins.

To me, it’s always been like a good luck charm. And it’s only become even more meaningful to me after being cast in the role of Odette and Odile.

I give it a loving rub between my fingers before I stuff it back into my back and start pulling on my tights.

“Your assistant joining us?” I ask, adjusting my leotard.

“Yeah!” Gus calls. “He just had to run down the street for something. How we looking?”

“Good, I think?” I step out and smile, giving a dorky little twirl.

“*Magnifico*!” Gus beams.

Just then, the door to the studio opens and a fairly good-looking younger guy steps in. When he sees me, he grins.

“Naomi, I presume?”

I nod, smiling awkwardly.

“Seb. Gus’ assistant.” He strides over and shakes my hand. I wince a little at the brutal strength in his grip, which, weirdly, lingers a little longer than necessary before he pulls away. “Boss, you need anything?”

“Nah, we’re all set.” Gus turns to me. “Ready when you are, Naomi. Can I get you anything before we start? Sparkling or still water? A real drink for the nerves?”

I laugh lightly. “Tempting, but sparkling water is great, thanks.”

Gus gives Seb a curt nod, and his assistant walks off to the kitchen.

“Let’s get you set up right…*here*.” Gus indicates an X on the floor.

I walk over to it, standing there as he fiddles with a few lights.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I smile at Seb when he hands me the sparkling water.

“It’s peach,” he shrugs. “Sorry, all we had.”

“Peach is peachy, thanks.”

I take a few sips and glance back over at Gus.

“Just another minute, Naomi,” he says, his back to me.

“I’d chug that back,” Seb chuckles. “These lights get *hot*, and Mr. Perfectionist over here takes his sweet time.”

“Hey, I’m paying her by the hour,” Gus laughs. “If we go over, Naomi, you’re getting double. Promise.”

“Then, please, take *all* the time you need,” I giggle, feeling more relaxed.

Seb’s right. The lights are *crazy* hot, and my skin's already getting warm. My forehead feels damp, and I take another big gulp of the sparkling water. Then another.

Why the *hell* are these lights so hot?

“Why don’t you stand right here, Naomi,” Seb murmurs.

I’m confused when he puts his hands on my hips and physically moves me over a few steps. Then it all sort of melts together as a fuzzy feeling warms through me.

Those *lights*.

I start to giggle.

“How’re you feeling, Naomi?”

It’s suddenly a struggle to lift my eyelids as I raise my gaze to Gus.

His eyes aren’t twinkling when he looks at me now. He’s not smiling, either.

The lens cap is still on the camera sitting on the tripod in front of me.

“I… It’s hot,” I say quietly, my words jumbling together. Confusion claws at me, fading in and out, like I’m confused about *why* I’m confused.

I’m here for a photoshoot. I’m going to make five hundred dollars.

Easy.

Peasy.

Lemon squeez—

My legs start to give out.

“Oops, let me help you,” Seb mutters, an edge in his tone that wasn’t there before. His hands land on my hips again.

Slowly, I sink limply into his arms.

What the fuck is happening.

“Why don’t you lie down, Naomi,” Gus growls into my ear. I feel a sense of weightlessness as I’m lifted and carried across the room.

Part of me doesn’t care. Part of me is still confused about being confused.

Another part is silently screaming blue fucking murder as I find myself laid across the bed in the corner.

The one with the camera on a tripod pointed right at it.

Hands begin to tug at my tutu.

“*What are you doing…*”

“We’re making a movie, Naomi,” Gus murmurs. His fingers slip under the strap of my leotard, his touch making my skin crawl. “And you’re the star.”

No.

No. No. No…

It doesn’t matter how many times I scream it in my head. It doesn’t stop the lights from dimming and the whole world from fading out.

But right now, that might be the best I could hope for.

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NICO

"GOTTA SAY, CARMY, POWER LOOKS FUCKIN' good on you."

My older brother smirks, watching me from the front steps of the house I grew up in as I kick the stand into position and slip off my bike.

The Barone house—if we're calling twenty-thousand-square-foot gothic French Renaissance mansions on 5th Avenue across the street from Central Park *houses* these days—looms above us like a villain's lair from a Disney fairytale.

I fucking *love* this place.

I pull off the helmet and lock it in the back saddle before I turn to look at my brother, then up at the house he now lives in with Lyra.

"I mean, I'm glad you're Don and everything now—never wanted it anyway, so—"

"You were never going to *get it*," he says dryly. "So don't play psychology games with me. I know them all. Besides, I think we're all painfully aware just how far you bent over backward to make damn sure you'd never have to take Pop's throne."

Guilty, your honor, on all charges.

Honestly, I have *way* too much fun fucking with Carmine. Mostly because I know pretty much nobody but Lyra and I—okay, Dante and Bianca too—*can* without worrying we'll never wake up again.

I mime mock scandal as I drop my jaw and press a hand to my chest. “Carmy, are you suggesting that I deliberately went out of my way to avoid taking on a job that comes with huge amounts of responsibility, stress, and danger, with pretty much zero perks? I am *shocked*, dear brother. Shocked and, honestly, a little appalled. Very appalled, actual—”

“Yeah, because neck tattoos, a *vibrant* dating life, racing motorcycles like you want to die, and getting your dick pierced are all usually hallmarks of the staid, strong and resolute types that sit on the throne of multi-generation mafia families,” Carmine adds dryly.

“Well, since you’ve got this all figured out so well, I think you should go ahead and keep the job.”

Carmine grins. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too. How’s the house that you unceremoniously kicked me out of?”

My brother sighs, rolling his eyes as he shoves his fingers through his hair. “Much quieter now, thanks.”

I grin. None of that is true. Well, the part about the ink, bikes, girls, and dick piercing is.

What? I’m the second-born son of a mafia don. Carmine was *always* going to be king. And that means I get to ride shotgun and enjoy the trip.

It’s the part after that which is bullshit, though. No one "kicked me out" of the house. Dad moved out to Long Island a couple of months ago, after his heart scare, when he officially retired and Carmine became the new don.

Which, yes, meant Carmy moved into this massive seat-of-power joint with Lyra.

But I'd moved out of this place and into my loft in SoHo years ago. I swing by now and again for meetings, or for Sunday family dinners—which, sadly, occur somewhat less frequently with Dad out on Long Island. But business-wise, I do most of mine out of Dad's old office uptown.

"You coming in, or what?" Carmine grunts.

"Yeah, gimme a sec."

I start to stick a cigarette between my lips.

"Nico…"

I glance up to see Carmine scowling and shaking his head. "Ditch the smoke, man. You know Pop hates it."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, the generation that smoked on *airplanes* and during fucking doctor's visits and ate dinner off lead plates has an issue with this?"

Carmine rolls his eyes yet again.

"You know, I can move back in *any time*," I grin at him.

"Cool, yeah, that's not happening."

I chuckle, tucking the cigarette back in the pack and bounding up the stairs to hug my brother. He claps me on the back before we turn and head inside, nodding briefly to Vic and Rocco, the two mountainous motherfuckers standing guard today.

"Oh, hey." I stop Carmine with a hand on his chest before we step around the corner into the living room where I can hear the laughing voices of my family. "When's the surprise coming?"

Carmine grins.

Today's visit has nothing to do with the family business. Our dad, Vito, is turning sixty-three. And the "surprise" is a 450 horsepower cherry red 1969 Chevelle that Carmine and I had fully restored for him.

We grew up hearing stories about the one exactly like it that Dad had back in the proverbial day. But that one got shot to shit and then torched in a gangland war the Italians had with the Puerto Ricans in the early 80s.

"Sitting on a flatbed around the corner," my brother murmurs in a low, conspiratorial voice. "Soon as everyone's here, they're dropping it off out front."

"He's going to lose his *shit*," I grin.

Carmine nods. "Well, Bianca claims she went above and beyond this year for a birthday present, too, so we'll see."

"Above and beyond her usual 'coupon for a daddy-daughter date', which *Dad* pays for? Sounds like a low fucking bar."

Carmine chuckles deeply as we both head around the corner into the fray.

"Nico!"

Tempest, one of my top two favorite sisters-in-law, rushes over and gives me a big hug. When she pulls away, her husband, my other brother Dante, comes over and grabs me in a big bear hug.

We're, as Dad likes to say, a family of strays. Although, if we're getting technical, only Carmine and I are the original package. Dante and Bianca are the upgrades that came later. Their dad, Bruno Sartorre, was dad's personal tailor, friend, and one of his top confidants. So, when he and their

mom passed away young, Bianca, Dante, and their older sister Claudia came to live with us.

The lapsed Catholic in me taps my chest in a vague cross when I think of that last name. Claudia was taken far too young, a victim of violence at the hands of men she trusted.

Even thinking about it today still gets my blood boiling. But at least Dante tracked down every single one of them and made them pay.

Very slowly, and *extremely* painfully. Dante's good people.

He also runs Club Venom, which is *the* place in New York for the city's most connected, influential, and powerful, especially if they have…*deviant* tastes.

That's a nice way of saying Club Venom is a sex club. But…you know… classy as *fuck*, and super exclusive.

"Car here yet?" Dante mutters into my ear.

I shake my head. "Carmine's got it coming after we're all here."

"Cannot *wait* to see that baby," he groans.

I chuckle. "So, what'd you guys get him?"

"The house."

I frown. "House?"

Dante smirks, and my brows shoot way up.

"Fuck me, *your* house? In Long Island?"

It's not like Vito doesn't have money—the man probably has more of it than the rest of us combined. But he's been *loving* staying out there at Dante

and Tempest's place these last few months—loves the house, loves the pool, loves the fact that it's ocean-facing.

Definitely loves the fact that he can blast Sinatra as loud as he wants and sunbathe in the nude without the neighbors complaining.

Dante chuckles. "I mean, we're *never* there. The city's our home now, probably for a long time. And man, he fuckin' loves it out there, so…"

"Well, *shit*," I sigh. "I went Dutch on a car, and you go and get him a fucking mansion in the Hamptons. Fuck you very much."

Dante chuckles, clapping me on the back. "We'll add your name to the bottom of the card."

"Dick."

I'm pulled away from Dante's smug grin by Lyra, *also* one of my top two favorite sisters-in-law, who gives me a big hug.

For a second, as I hug her back, it flashes through my mind that she's *also* one of Naomi's best friends, along with Bianca.

Fuck.

Just like that, I'm right back where I was at the Black Court the other night…my entire thought process consumed by *that fucking girl*.

But before I descend too far, the other door to the room bangs open, and the man himself strides out, a bottle of wine from the infamous Barone cellars in the basement in each of his hands.

"There he is!" Vito grins widely, putting the bottles down on a side table and striding over to me. I hug him fiercely, clapping him on the back before I pull away.

“sixty-three, huh?”

“Who'da thought I’d make it this far, huh?” he chuckles.

“I’ve got you down for a hundred and nine, myself,” I shrug. “You’d better get going on a good calisthenics routine if I’m going to get paid.”

Dad roars with laugher and hugs me again before he turns to everyone else. “So, everybody hungry?”

For dad’s cooking? I literally never thought I’d say this when he first took it up as a hobby a year or so ago, but *always*.

When he first started—ohhh, it was bad. Actually, bad would have been a sizable improvement. Dad’s first forays into being Emeril Lagasse resulted in food so bad you were legitimately at risk of expiring face-down in your *Cacio y Pepe*.

Mercifully, Bianca’s husband Kratos—who can cook like a *motherfucker*—took him under his wing and gave him some serious pointers.

As if on cue, the front door bangs open.

“Sorry we’re late!” Bianca yells as she stampedes into the room like the little ball of energy that she is.

“Princess!” Dad crows, meeting her halfway across the room and flinging his arms around—hands down, no question, and I'm totally cool with it—his favorite kid.

“Happy birthday, Dad,” she grins, squeezing him tightly.

Behind her, Kratos ducks his head slightly to avoid hitting it as he steps into the room, his massive frame filling the doorway. Dad pulls away from our sister to beam at his son-in-law, pulling him into a tight hug and giving him a firm clap on the back.

“Happy birthday, Vito,” Kratos rumbles with a big grin.

Dad steps back, rubbing his hands together gleefully. “Okay, we’re all here. Let’s *eat*.”

* * *

THREE FULL COURSES and cake later, I’m fucking *stuffed*. But that doesn’t stop me from grinning, laughing, and getting to my feet to clap when Vito incredulously opens the card from Dante and Tempest, saying they're giving him the house he’s been living in for the last few months.

He keeps saying “It’s too fuckin’ much! It’s *too fuckin’ much*!” over and over again as he hugs them both tightly.

Great, *that’s* the act Carmine and I have to follow. At least we didn’t show up with dinner coupons like Bianca probably did.

I glance at my brother and he nods, grinning, his arm snaking around Lyra’s waist as she perches on his lap.

“Hey, Pop,” he clears his throat. “Nico and I got you something, too.”

He pulls the little gift-wrapped box out of his pocket and slides it across the dinner table. Vito looks at it curiously before he picks it up and shakes it, making Tempest crack up.

“Vito, just *open it*!”

“All right! All right! Jeez, the *patience* on this one—”

“None,” Dante sighs with a deep chuckle. “Literally none.”

Tempest playfully hits him before he leans down to kiss her.

That’s when I realize I’m the only loser here without a date. Well, Dad’s flying solo, too, but…c’mon.

I shake that thought away as Dad tears the wrapping paper off and pulls the lid off the box. His brows knit for a second as he looks down into it.

“What are these keys for?”

I grin. “Maybe we should go outside and see.”

He looks up at me, then at Carmine, his brows raised and a curious look on his face. “What are you two up to?” he chuckles, wagging a finger at us.

“C’mon and see for yourself, Pop,” Carmine grins as we all get up from the table.

We head to the front door, I swing it open, and Bianca escorts Dad outside.

“Holy *fuck*!” he chokes the second he steps outside. His hand flies to the railing to steady himself. “Are you fucking *kiddin’* me?!”

Carmine and I glance at each other and fist bump behind Dad’s back as he howls with delight.

“That’s my car!” he roars, laughing. “Holy shit, that’s *my exact car*!”

“Happy birthday, Dad,” I say, wrapping an arm over his shoulders and patting his chest.

He turns to both of us, incredulous. “I… I don’t even know what to say…”

“Say you’ll take it for a spin right now,” Carmine chuckles.

Dad beams. “You know what? I think I might—”

“Uh, before you do?”

We turn to see Bianca and Kratos still standing in the doorway, both of them with these weird, doofus-looking smiles on their faces.

"*Bet she went all out with dinner AND movie coupons*," Carmine snickers into my ear before Lyra elbows him to shut it.

"Dad, I…well, *we*…got you something kind of special. It hasn't arrived yet, but, well… We wanted to at least *tell you* what it's going to be today."

Dad chuckles as he walks over to her. "Sweetheart, I don't care if it's an empty box. I love ya."

Kratos clears his throat awkwardly. "Yeah, it's, uh, not empty."

Bianca's face heats as she chews on her lip. Dad frowns in puzzlement.

"What is it, princess?"

"Dad?" She glances at Kratos. Kratos glances at her. Then they both look at Vito.

"You're going to be a grandpa."

They say it at the same time, and for half a second, the whole fucking stoop goes pin-drop silent.

Half a second after that, it *erupts*.

Vito is losing his mind, tears in his eyes as he swoops Bianca up in a huge hug. He turns to Kratos next, all but sobbing into the big guy's chest before he pulls away, only to lose it all over again.

"I'm gonna be a grandpa!" He whirls to yell it to all of 5th Avenue. "I'm gonna be a fuckin' *grandpa*!!"

Lyra and Tempest freak out, rushing to Bianca and hugging and screaming and all of that. Dante grins, shaking Kratos' hand firmly before he brings

him in for a hug.

“Well holy fucking shit,” Carmine chuckles, shaking his head as he hugs our brother-in-law. “Got one past the goalie, huh?”

“You really want to hear the gory details?” Kratos grunts with a warning tone.

“*Nope*.”

I laugh as I shove past Carmine to take my turn hugging the giant of the family. “Congrats, man. That’s fucking amazing.”

I glance at Dante and Carmine.

“Shit… Guess that makes us uncles?”

“Uncle Sex Club, Uncle Pierced Dick, and Uncle Psycho,” Carmine groans, glancing back at Kratos. “Poor kid’s *fucked*.”

It all becomes a blur after that, all of us just camped out on the front steps of the house laughing. Tempest wants to know how far along my sister is. Lyra asks if she’s quitting the Zakharova for good. I ask how young is *too young* to give a kid motorcycle riding lessons and get thoroughly slapped.

Finally, Vito pulls Bianca in for another deep hug.

“I’ve been drinking, princess,” he chuckles. “How about *you* take the Chevelle out for its first spin?”

Bianca’s brows leap up to her hairline. “Wait, seriously?”

“Seriously,” Dad beams, handing her the keys. “Take it around the block or around the park. Show my grandkid how much fun they’re going to have with Pop-pop.”

Bianca squeals, hugging him tightly before she skips down the stairs with all of us behind.

The car is *sweet*. The guys at the restoration shop know our family well, and Kratos pulled some strings with some people he knows to get specialty original parts.

I watch, still grinning as Bianca bolts to the driver's side door and sticks the key in the lock. She glances back at us with an ear-to-ear smile as she unlocks the car and swings the door open.

Several questions occur to me at once:

One—why is the car ticking.

Two—why am I being shoved violently to the side as Kratos hurls himself down the stairs straight at his wife.

Three—and this is the largest one—*why is the whole world turning orange as an invisible truck slams into me, punching me and everyone around me back with the force of a wrecking ball*.

But it’s when I see the fire, and feel the explosion, and hear the screaming, that it all falls horribly, viciously into place.

Oh, fuck.

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NICO

THE HOSPITAL REEKS of antiseptic and chemicals.

I hate it.

I've hated hospitals since my mother, Giada, died in one far too young, when Carmine and I were still kids and before Dante, Claudia, and Bianca moved in with us.

I hate the harsh overhead lights. Hate the sterile white walls, the quiet murmurs of pain humming behind every breath and beep of a monitor.

Hospitals are for the broken. And tonight, that broken one is one of ours.

Bianca lies unconscious in bed, a tangle of IVs snaking from her arms, her skin pale but unmarred, except for bandage on her arm where she took a hit from the blast. Machines hum low around her, a dull, robotic orchestra of survival.

She's going to be okay.

…So, thank *fuck*, is the baby.

Lyra sits at Bianca's side, holding her hand. Dante stands on the other side of the bed, his eyes icy steel as he looks down at our sister. Tempest paces

like a restless animal, chewing her cuticles, and Carmine has launched into full don mode just outside the room, organizing things with the capos and his head *consigliere*, Santino.

I stand leaning against the windowsill, my fingers drumming restlessly on the wall, pure rage boiling inside me like molten lead.

And when I glance at my dad, I realize how true the saying about apples and trees is.

Vito legit looks like he's been possessed by a demon.

I've seen my father in a rage before. I've seen him cold and calculated, blistering with quiet fury. But I've never seen him like this—teeth gritted, face contorted, and eyes shifting between panic when he looks at his daughter, and pure wrath when he pulls them away.

"This isn't how it's done anymore," he snarls under his breath. Suddenly, he whirls, and even I flinch when he slams his fist into the wall, hard enough that the drywall cracks, fragments crumbling to the floor like bone dust.

"*It just isn't*!" he barks again, chest heaving as he whirls to look at me. "Those days are fucking gone!"

He's talking to us, but also to the ghosts of the men he buried in the name of a more civilized empire. Dad's been in the game since New York was a different animal, run by violence and mob justice. He's also part of the generation that restructured the underworld with blood and then rebuilt it with civility. Rules. Order.

But the old world, with car bombs in broad daylight, just came knocking.

Just then, the door to the room bursts inward with a force that almost takes it off the hinges. Kratos storms in like the Devil himself from his hospital bed, still trailing IV lines from his arm.

His eyes are wild and bloodshot, filled with a fury that’s not human. He looks like something the ancient Greeks would have whispered about and written into legend.

He drops heavily to his knees beside Bianca’s bed.

“*Princess…*” he chokes quietly. It's like the rest of us aren’t even there.

Kratos is the only reason my sister is still alive. While the rest of us were still stupidly trying to figure out why the car started ticking when she opened the fucking door, Kratos was already bolting toward her. He managed to wrench her away and dive for cover behind another parked car, shielding her when the Chevelle erupted into a fireball.

Kratos isn’t walking away unscathed. The blood-soaked bandages on one of his shoulders is proof of that. But right now, I’m guessing he doesn’t feel *shit* except pure fear for Bianca and their unborn child.

Lyra steps forward, placing a hand on his uninjured shoulder.

“She’s okay,” she whispers quietly. “The doctors are just keeping her under so her body can heal. And the baby’s heartbeat is strong. They’re both going to be fine.”

Kratos exhales like he’s been holding his breath since the blast.

Tempest drops to her knees and throws her arms around him. He hugs her back, and when he pulls away, I see the look in his eyes, the same as in mine.

And Dad’s. And Dante’s.

AKA, downright fucking *feral*.

Carmine steps into the room, his face as grim and his eyes as vicious as everyone else's. Kratos turns to him, a blackness I’m not sure I’ve ever seen

in him rippling just beneath the surface.

“Short list of suspects,” he rumbles. “*Now*.”

Carmine meets Kratos’ gaze without flinching. “We’re working on it, brother,” he growls quietly.

“Do whatever you have to,” Kratos hisses, rising to his full height. “I’m going to go out there and turn this entire city to *rubble*, door by fucking door, until I find out who did this.”

“Good,” Carmine says.

No hesitation. Just fury meeting fury.

“I’ll come with you,” I say, cracking my knuckles and feeling the pull of violence in my veins. I’m not like Carmine. I don't typically *need* to feed the beast inside me with bloodshed and pain.

But right now?

Hell yeah I do.

“Ares is already getting our people together,” Kratos snarls. Ares as in Ares Drakos, Kratos’ oldest brother and head of the Drakos Greek mafia family.

“Then what the fuck are we waiting for,” I grunt. “Let’s *go*.”

“I’m coming too.”

Tempest shoots Dante a look when he says it. But when she sees the ripple of fury in his face, she just nods.

Carmine rolls his neck. “Santino has our guys out there already. I'm—”

“*Kratos…*”

The giant’s black cloud of fury evaporates at the soft, broken sound of Bianca’s voice behind us.

Kratos turns instantly, rushing to her side and crouching down beside her again, brushing her cheeks with both hands, raw love smoothed across a face carved from rage.

“I’m here,” he murmurs. “I’m right here, baby.”

He presses his forehead to hers, and for a moment, there’s no explosion, no enemies, no blood on the streets. Just them, and their love.

The kind I’ve never had.

The kind I very much doubt someone like me gets.

I look away.

The moment between Kratos and Bianca hangs there, delicate and holy in the middle of a sea of wreckage.

Then the machines beep steadily again, and Bianca falls back asleep.

Kratos doesn’t move.

He just holds her hand and watches her breathe, as if he could anchor her to this world with nothing more than his will.

I step out into the hallway. I need air. Well, air flavored with cigarette smoke, to be precise. I also need silence so I can think.

Someone sent a message tonight.

And now, we’re going to send one right the fuck back.

I pull out my phone and send a group text to all my “little birds”—my spies, my informants… The people who live in the shadows of New York and see

things most people don’t.

ME

If you haven’t already heard what happened to my family tonight, you will. Find me who did it, and you’ll get whatever you want. The sooner the better.

I hit send, then slide the phone into my pocket as I slip a cigarette between my lips and walk out of Lenox Hill Hospital and into the night.

Someone just made the mistake of fucking with *my family*.

They have no idea what they’ve just awakened inside me.

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NICO

THE BAR on Avenue D smells like piss, stale beer and defeat.

It’s the kind of place that only exists for drowning one's misery, then setting oneself up for more of the same.

There’s a flickering Coors sign in the window, duct tape on the "leather" booths, and a jukebox that probably hasn’t worked since the Bush administration—the first one. The lighting’s bad enough to hide bloodstains, but not to mask the crust of failure clinging to every square inch of the place.

This is where I’m meeting Mario.

Great first fucking impression, Mario.

I don’t know him. We’ve never met. But an hour ago, one of my little birds got back to me, saying he knew a guy with connections to the scumbags who just tried to hurt my fucking family. My contact also said the loser was interested in making a deal for some information.

If he’s truly connected to those motherfuckers, it's touch and go if I even let him *walk out of here*. We'll see.

Mario is easy to spot. He’s the scared shitless twerp slumped in the corner booth, a half-finished pint in front of him and a shot glass tipped on its side. His eyes are bloodshot, his shirt stained. His hands tremble.

He doesn’t even see me until I slide into the booth across from him, stretching out lazily like I’ve got all the time in the world.

I don’t, but he doesn’t know that yet.

“M-Mr. Barone?” he stammers, sitting up with a drunken jolt that almost knocks over his beer. "Shit. I—I wasn’t sure you’d come."

“My friend says you have something I want." Mario shivers as I lean forward over the grimy table, letting my eyes cut into him. “*Information*.”

I sit back again, casually lighting a cigarette. It’s not for effect—it’s to keep me from grabbing him by the throat and slamming his face onto the sticky table.

Because my sister almost died.

And this guy might know—might be *connected* to—who’s responsible.

Mario gulps. His eyes dart around, like he's afraid someone might drag him out of here and shoot him for talking.

"I didn’t have anything to do with it," he blurts. "I swear to God, Mr. Barone. I didn’t know what they were planning!”

I don’t say anything. Just stare at him over the tip of my cigarette, letting the silence stretch out.

Making him sweat.

"It was a job, all right? Just a job. I swear to fucking *God*, I wasn't personally involved. But some guys I work with…yeah, the order came in

to wire up that real nice sixty-nine Chevelle. That’s all I know."

My fingers curl tighter around the cigarette.

“Who do you work for, Mario,” I growl.

“I—” His eyes skate around the room again and his throat bobs before he leans in closer. “*I can’t say*. They’ll fuckin’ kill me, Mr. Barone.”

I smile coldly. “Well, *they*—whoever *they* are—would have to catch you first in order to kill you, yes?”

Suddenly, he’s choking as my hand jerks out to wrap around his throat.

“*I,* on the other hand, have you right here,” I hiss. “And I can assure you, if you don’t start talking, I’ll be inclined to assume you had *everything* to do with the car bomb that almost killed my pregnant baby sister last night. I'm sure you’ve got the brain power to understand what happens if I stick with that assumption.”

I let go, and he chokes out a coughing, rasping sound. He winces, swallows, then drags his bloodshot eyes back up to me.

“Look, I’m just a contractor. I do odd jobs for—”

I think he literally shits himself when I set my gun down on the table with a heavy thud, my hand resting over it, the business end pointed at his chest.

“*Please*, Mario,” I smile. “Don’t leave me in suspense.”

He nods quickly.

“They’re called the Obsidian Syndicate, okay? Eastern Europeans, I think. *Real* bad dudes, know what I’m sayin'?”

I don’t really give a shit about anything but the name of the about-to-be-dead motherfuckers who tried to kill Bianca.

“What the fuck does this Obsidian Syndicate have against my family?”

I truly don’t expect him to know. Mario has “low-level dipshit foot soldier” written all over him, and I doubt he knows dick-all about any master plans these assholes might have. But I ask anyway, since when he *doesn’t* have an answer, he’ll just feel more indebted to me for any further questions I have.

Welcome to how my brain works, constantly.

But then Mario surprises me.

“The Syndicate?” He shakes his head. “Against your family? Probably nothin’. They just get paid to do other people's dirty work.”

My jaw ticks. “I don’t suppose you’d have any idea who paid your friends in this case to set off that bomb?”

He shivers. “All I know is that they call him the Politician. They do a lot of work for him—at least, they did,” he mutters, looking away.

Oh, really.

“Don’t be a cock tease, Mario. You can’t pump me up with that first part and then leave me with blue balls.”

He flinches as my hand jerks out and grabs the collar of his t-shirt.

“What the fuck do you mean they *did*, past tense?”

Mario sucks on his teeth, his eyes doing another paranoid sweep of the bar as his voice drops lower.

“Look, I really don’t know much—”

“That's pretty fucking obvious, Mario. Keep talking.”

“This guy, this Politician dude, he tried to cut ties with them, you know? But, I mean, I think there’s a contract and shit, and the Syndicate, well, they don’t like it when people back out of contracts.”

Mario is quickly becoming one of the most interesting people I know.

“*Who is he*,” I snarl.

“I—I don’t know!” he whispers. “But I have something! To barter with!”

He starts to reach for his pocket, then freezes when I draw back the hammer of my gun with a metallic click.

“I refuse to believe you’re *that* stupid, Mario. Both hands on the table.”

His face pales. “Okay, okay, no problem, Mr. Barone. I just—”

Suddenly, before he can utter another word, his eyes bulge and he jabs a finger past me.

"That’s him!" he blurts. "That’s the guy!"

I turn my head slowly.

The shitty old flatscreen TV mounted over the bar is tuned to one of those 24-hour news channels, some talking head droning on about funding initiatives and urban redevelopment. Scrolling text at the bottom reads: “Congressman Leonard Kim accepts POTUS nomination for Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.”

“That’s the fuckin’ guy!” Mario squeaks.

I go still. Fury throbs inside me as I stare at the screen. Slowly, I pull my gaze back to Mario.

“*That’s* the Politician?”

He nods eagerly. “Yeah! Hundred percent.”

My eyes narrow. “*Congressman Leonard Kim* paid the Obsidian Syndicate to blow up a car outside my fucking home?”

Congressman Leonard Kim, as in *Naomi’s fucking father.*

The blood in my veins turns to ice as I turn back to glare murder at the TV.

Leonard is standing behind a podium, flanked by smiling interns and city officials. He’s *also* surrounded by about a dozen huge guys in black suits and earpieces.

Fuck.

I haven’t been paying close attention to the news recently. But you’d have to be living under a rock not to have heard that New York’s own Congressman Kim was about to get a Cabinet position at the White House.

The wall of security guys around him are Secret fucking Service.

So if Mario is telling the truth, and Leonard Kim *was* responsible for the bombing last night, we are now shit out of luck in terms of payback, because he just became untouchable.

“You’re sure?" My voice is quiet.

Mario nods so hard I think his head might snap off. "Positive. I didn’t meet him or anything, but the others did. Said he was real careful. Didn’t leave a trail. But it was him. I’d know him anywhere."

Mario clears his throat.

“Look, uh, Mr. Barone, I *did* bring something. And I think it might be something you want if this is the guy who tried to hurt your blood.”

“Well?” I hiss quietly.

Mario swallows thickly. “I, uh…listen, before I do—”

“You’re hardly in a position to negotiate, Mario.”

He shakes his head quickly. “All I want is immunity.”

I scowl at him. “Do I look like the fucking cops to you?”

Mario’s head wags side to side again. “No, I mean immunity from your brother-in-law. Kratos.” Whatever color is left in Mario’s face drains as he takes a shaky breath. “That giant motherfucker is on the *warpath* right now, man. I mean, he’s leaving a trail of fucking bodies…” Mario shudders. “If he thinks I had something to do with that car—”

“You don’t give me what you have right fucking now, Mario,” I growl. “And I’ll make damn sure Kratos thinks you had *everything* to do with almost killing his pregnant wife and unborn child.”

Mario’s hand moves so fast I don’t even have time to tell him to go slow. He jams it into his coat pocket and instantly whips it back out again, slamming something small onto the sticky table between us.

I frown. “The fuck?”

He lifts his hand, revealing a thumb drive. Nervousness flitters in his eyes as he glances around again.

“You know how I said they don’t like it when people break contracts? Well…” He taps the table next to the thumb drive. “This is their insurance policy.”

I eye him doubtfully. “And how is it that someone like *you* has it?”

He clears his throat and then nervously takes a big mouthful of beer. “Because this congressman, he didn’t just pull out of a contract. He started a fight about it. He had some of his guys come after some Obsidian

Syndicate guys. They run some operations out of space in the West Village. So I’m over there delivering some merchandise, and one of them was telling me about this video, and how it was gonna be the end of this congressman if he tried any more shit. But then these dudes came busting in, guns blazing.” Mario shudders. “That's when I grabbed the thumb drive and got out through the fire escape. Gotta look out for number one, you know?”

I glance at the thumb drive. “What’s the video.”

His voice drops to a whisper. “It’s a sex tape.”

My nose wrinkles. “Of the congressman?”

Mario shakes his head. “His *daughter*.”

For a second, the Earth stops moving, and I can hear my pulse thudding like a drum in my ears.

“Say that again,” I growl.

Mario clears his throat. “It’s a sex tape.”

“Of *Naomi Kim*?”

He nods. “That’s what they told me.”

What the *fuck*.

I don’t really know Naomi. She's just "Bianca and Lyra’s friend". But literally everything I’ve ever heard about her makes it almost impossible that this is true.

She's a good girl. So good that even Lyra and Bianca, who are pretty good themselves, make fun of her for it. The committed dancer. Daughter of a well-liked, powerful Congressman.

And she made a *sex tape*?

My brows furrow as I glare at Mario. “You’ve watched it?”

He shakes his head. “No way. I dunno, I figured someone might be tracking it or something.”

I roll my eyes. “It says Best Buy on the fucking side of the thumb drive, Mario,” I mutter. “I doubt we’re talking CIA encryption.” I think for a moment, staring at the USB key. “Come with me.”

Mario lurches to his feet and follows me as I grab the drive and march out of the bar to where my bike is parked. I unlock the seat cover, pulling it up to get to the lockbox underneath, and haul out my laptop. I set that down on top of a newspaper stand next to us, boot it up, and connect the USB key.

A folder opens.

There’s only one file in it—a movie file labeled “Naomi”.

Something claws at me as I double click on it, opening it.

Holy fuck.

It’s actually her.

She’s lying on a bed—oddly, wearing a tutu and tights. My brows furrow as two men climb onto the bed with her. Her eyes open, glancing at them with a strange, sloppy smile on her face, like maybe she’s been drinking.

“Ready to have a good time, Naomi?” one of the men, an older guy, chuckles.

“Yeaaaah….” Naomi sighs, her eyes closing.

One of them starts to pull her tutu down. The other peels off her leotard straps.

I yank the USB stick out and slam the laptop shut, something strange clawing inside me.

“I’m keeping this,” I snarl in Mario’s general direction, pocketing the thumb drive.

“Oh, yeah, no, for sure, Mr. Barone,” he mumbles, shuffling away. He coughs delicately. “So, uh, about your brother-in-law—”

“Start running.”

Mario stares at me. “Wait. What?”

“*Start. Running.*”

His eyes go wide. “Why?!”

“Because at some point, my brother-in-law is going to call me and ask if I have anything new.” I lift my shoulders. “And I make it a point never to lie to family.”

His face goes white. “Hang on! But—”

“*So*, if I were you, I would start running, and I wouldn’t stop until New York, Kratos, and any dealings you had with Congressman Kim and this Obsidian Syndicate were *well* behind you. Are. We. Clear.”

Mario doesn’t even answer, just turns and starts booking it down the dark sidewalk.

Might be the smartest move the little dipshit ever made in his life.

I stand there outside the bar and pull the thumb drive out of my pocket. I glare at it, dark malice swirling inside me, making connections, considering strings to pull.

Building out my plan.

I’m going to *destroy* Leonard Kim with this.

Even if it means going through Naomi.

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NAOMI

THE ALARM HASN'T GONE OFF YET, but I'm awake.

Have been for a while.

The sky outside my window is still a muted shade of gray, midway between dawn and night. My sheets are damp with sweat. My hands are clenched, like I've been holding onto the mattress to keep from falling through it.

I blink at the ceiling, the dull pre-dawn noise of New York the only sound. It could be any other morning where I wake up early to stretch before heading to the theater.

It's not.

Because today, I wake up to jagged fragments of memory. Nightmares that wrap around my chest and squeeze until I forget how to breathe.

I rub my face, digging my knuckles into my eye sockets, hoping pressure will erase the memories.

The bed.

The cold.

The nurse's voice.

“You were digitally penetrated, Mia.”

Mia. I gave them a fake name. I sat in that clinic with trembling hands and a queasy stomach, lying about who I was because for some *truly* fucked up reason, I was worried about my dad’s political aspirations, especially with his upcoming nomination to a Cabinet position.

I’d just been raped, or assaulted, or whatever you want to call it, and *I gave the nurse a fake name*. Because even after waking up in that studio, naked and used and sick with myself, part of me was still thinking about Leonard's career. His future.

God, am I fucked up.

I hate that part of me.

I push the covers off and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. The coldness of the floor grounds me for a moment.

I walk to the bathroom, shed the oversized t-shirt I slept in, and get into the shower.

Again.

I did this three hours ago. I got up around 2 a.m., trembling, and stood under the water until my skin was shriveled. But now I do it again anyway. The feeling didn’t go away before—maybe this time, it will.

I don’t cry. There’s no energy for that. Only the sound of the water and the slick slide of soap against my skin as I scrub my body raw.

When I get out, I don’t bother with makeup. I throw on black leggings and a black leotard with a hoodie over it. My ballet bag is already packed. I haven’t touched my phone in three days.

The only texts I've answered were on that first night, and they were short, flat lies: *"Just a bug. I'm okay."*

I'm not okay.

But I'm going to class.

If not, I'll fall apart.

If I don't dance, I won't know who I am anymore.

I throw my hair into a quick bun, zip up my hoodie, and walk out into the pale morning.

The cold wind bites at my skin as I walk to the subway. I try to forget his hands. Try to forget the sticky residue on my stomach, the panic climbing up my throat when I opened my eyes and realized I was naked and alone.

The bed was stripped. The lights were off. The camera was gone. Actually, *everything* was gone from the studio, except the bare boxspring I was lying on.

Naked. Sore between my legs.

Cum on my fucking belly.

Those first few numb hours are a blur. I remember throwing up on the floor, and then finding my bag riffled through, with some cash, my iPad, and a pair of my fucking underwear missing from it.

My mother's libretto of *Swan Lake* was also gone.

After that, I threw up again, yanked on my clothes, and ran out.

The nurse who saw me at the nearby clinic was kind. She's the one who examined me and told me there was no evidence anyone had had sex with me. They'd used their fingers on me, though.

In me.

That’s when I vomited yet again, somehow.

She also told me they’d run the semen sample from my skin through their database, but nothing had popped up. Her face had twisted when she told me she legally *had* to report this as a crime, and that when I was ready, she was going to need my real name.

I just nodded when she smiled again and walked out of the room to get the paperwork and the in-house therapist.

The second she left, I ran.

Today, I’m going back to the one place I’ve always felt safe, the only place that still feels like it belongs to me.

The ballet studio.

* * *

THE BACK DOOR of the Zakharova Theater is traditionally where all the dancers meet up at the start of the day to shoot the shit, bitch and moan, or smoke before we go inside to destroy ourselves at the barre. Usually, I *love* standing out here with my friends.

Today, it feels foreign.

Lyra, Milena, Brooklyn, and Evelina are already there, huddled together. Lyra looks like a wreck—eyes puffy, hair hastily pinned, terrible body language.

Then they spot me.

"Naomi!" Milena says, breaking from the group to rush toward me. The other three follow. “How are you feeling?”

Horrible.

Disgusting.

Violated.

I shrug tiredly. “I’m…okay. It was just a stomach bug.”

Milena’s brows knit. “You were MIA for almost three days, *solnishka.”*

Her gaze lingers on me for another second before the others crowd around.

“So… What’s going on?” I say, forcing a smile even though it feels totally hollow. Empty.

Lyra lowers her puffy eyes, shaking her head. “It’s just…a lot to process. It’s been a weird few days, you know?”

The rest of them nod solemnly in agreement.

Okayyy, I’m definitely missing something.

“Have you gone to see her yet?” Evelina asks me. “I mean, I know you were sick, but I'm sure she’d love to see you.”

I blink. “I…” My head shakes. “What’s going on?”

They all fall silent.

Milena’s face softens.

"Wait... You don’t know?"

My stomach clenches. “I’ve…had my phone off for three days. What is it?”

Lyra squeezes her eyes shut, hugging herself. “Someone set off a car bomb outside the Barone house at Vito’s birthday party. Bianca almost walked right into it. Kratos pulled her back. She’s still in hospital.”

The words hit like a punch to the face.

"*What*?!” I scream. Vaughn catches my horrified expression and jogs over from the group of male dancers he’s been smoking with.

“You disappeared on us,” he says with a frown.

“She didn’t know about Bianca,” Brooklyn says quickly and quietly before he can launch into any of his usual innuendo.

“*Fuck*, are you serious?”

I ignore him and focus on Lyra. “So Bianca—”

"She’s fine," Lyra says quickly. "She’s on bed rest now, but she’s okay."

I stare blankly at her.

"She’s pregnant," Milena says gently.

Something sparks in me.

Warmth. Joy. The first happiness I’ve felt in days.

"The baby’s fine," Lyra continues. "They’re monitoring her, keeping her off her feet for a while, but…” Her mouth twists. “She might have to quit the company. I think she was planning on staying at least into her second trimester, but now… I don’t know.”

The words hang there, heavy and looming.

The idea of Bianca *quitting ballet* doesn’t quite compute.

"She’ll be okay," Evelina says again, her voice hushed.

It's time. The crowd of dancers begins to trail inside. Vaughn hangs back a second, studying me carefully.

“You okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, just…this stomach thing.”

His brow furrows as he shoves his fingers through his dark hair, the tattoos on his forearms rippling. “Shoulda called me, dude.”

I shrug. “It’s…fine. I just needed some rest. I’m totally fine now.”

“So… You’re saying you’re fine.”

I feel my lips curl slightly as he grins his roguishly charming grin at me.

“Yeah, I’m—”

“Fine,” he finishes. “Well, in that case—let's go get worked over by Madame K.”

He turns to follow the rest of the company inside. Before I can do the same, Milena pulls me slightly aside, her brow furrowed.

"Are you *sure* you’re okay?" she asks worriedly.

I nod, too quickly.

"You look like you’ve been through hell."

My mouth opens. I want to tell her. Want to spill everything. But the words shrivel on my tongue.

"It’s just a bug," I lie. My voice barely registers.

Milena doesn’t press, but the concern in her eyes cuts deep.

"Okay," she says softly. "Just... Don’t disappear on us again. Please."

I nod.

Inside, after I emerge from the changing room, the studio mirrors reflect a version of me I don't recognize. Pale, hollow-eyed, brittle. Weak.

I realize that I've actively been avoiding looking into mirrors since…*it*… happened.

A black, curdling sensation writhes inside me as I forcibly pull my gaze from my reflection.

"Odette's first entrance, please!" Madame Kuzmina, in her usual black shawls and glittering rings, is already shouting instructions at the rehearsal pianist, her voice slicing through the space like a blade.

Then, the pianist starts to play, and I take my first steps.

The role of Odette/Odile is grueling enough on a *good* day.

Today, it feels impossible.

I'm rusty from the three days away, and it feels like there's a dead weight clinging to my back and throwing me off. When I try to hit that first arabesque, it's like I suddenly have no balance at all.

With a grimace, I wobble, ankle shaking a little before I lose my balance entirely.

Embarrassment floods my face as I feel the eyes of everyone on me.

The piano stops abruptly.

"Again," Madame Kuzmina says sharply. The music starts again, and I launch into the steps that—frankly—I could do in my sleep at this point.

Except, again, my body fails me. It doesn't follow directions, and my mind even forgets what comes next.

It’s a simple enough section. A sequence I’ve nailed a *thousand* times. But today, I can’t seem to remember where my feet go, how to turn my head, what my arms do.

I manage to get through it without falling the next time. But when I start dancing with the prince, I crash and burn three times in a row. Kuzmina finally claps her hands.

"Stop,” she says tightly in her Russian accent. “Everyone, take five. Naomi, over here, please."

I follow her to the front corner by the rosin box, my heart pounding.

"You’re not present today," she says bluntly. "Your body is here, but your mind is elsewhere."

I open my mouth. Nothing comes out.

“Where are you, Naomi? A *Swan Lake* without a Swan Queen goes nowhere, yes?”

I nod stiffly.

“So?”

“I…” I shake my head, feeling anxiety clawing at my insides. “I’m just… distracted, Madame. I’m having an off day.”

“Dancers don't get to have *off days*,” she murmurs quietly. Then she sighs, looking piercingly at me. "Naomi, do you still feel capable of this role?"

It’s like a dagger to the chest.

"Yes!” I blurt, more terror than I would have liked in my tone before I manage to rein it in. “Yes,” I say again, more calmly. “I’m fine. I just... I had a stomach bug."

Kuzmina’s gaze narrows slightly. "Dove is more than capable. We could let her take over for a few more days. Just until you recover."

For the record, I have *nothing* against our newest company member with the white-pink hair, subtle tattoos, and a somewhat aloof and mysterious demeanor. She's a beautiful dancer. But I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been having almost near-*constant* anxiety ever since she joined the Zakharova a few months ago and was immediately cast as my understudy—especially since she’s *played it before*.

I shake my head frantically. "No. Please. I can do it."

Madame holds my gaze for a long moment. Then she nods once, curtly. "Let's do it again, then.”

* * *

IT’S ONLY through sheer willpower that I make it through rehearsal. It’s not my best work, and I feel pure shame and mortification every time I barely get through a simple section. But I do make it.

When the others filter out at the end of the day, I stay.

I can’t go home. I can’t go sit and stare at my four walls.

Besides that, I *do* need to practice. I need to fight through whatever darkness is trying to take this part of me.

I will *not* let that happen.

Plus, even if it was a disaster, today’s rehearsal made me realize that dancing might be the only way I can feel anything at all right now.

I make my way to the main stage. It's dim now, and the house lights are off, casting the theater into shadows that stretch wide and deep. I flick the

switch to turn on a couple of work lights.

Then I take my place, without music.

And I start to dance.

It’s slow going at first. But I force myself to take the choreography step by step, pausing when I have to. Sweat clings to my skin and dampens my hair. My muscles ache and my feet scream for mercy. But I keep going, growing more and more confident as my muscles begins to remember what my mind momentarily forgot.

I finish my variation, breathless and lungs burning, finally nailing the bit that tripped me up earlier. For a moment, something close to pride surges through my chest, pulling my lips into a pleased little smile.

Then, something jarring sucks all the air from my lungs as the icy cold sharpness of it has me whirling, my smile shattering.

It’s the sound of *clapping*.

Slow. Mocking. Coming from the darkened, empty seats.

My heart stutters and I freeze, eyes straining toward the shadowed rows.

Slowly, a shape begins to emerge from the darkness, dressed all in black.

Nico.

He materializes like smoke, a wraith pulling itself from the gloom. His frame unfolds from the shadows, his black leather jacket and icy blue eyes glinting under the work lights as he slowly ascends the stage stairs.

Still applauding, slowly.

He doesn’t smile at first, just watches me with that same expression that he had on the rooftop before he licked my blood off his finger.

"*Beautiful*," he says softly, flicking open a lighter and sparking the cigarette I've just noticed is perched between his lips. The cherry glows when he inhales, casting an eerie orange light across the sharp lines of his cheekbones and jaw. "You really are something on stage."

He exhales a plume of smoke, stepping closer.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

He tilts his head. "Well, Naomi, I came to *collect*."

My dread only escalates, cutting through me like blades.

"Collect…what?" I choke.

Nico stops just in front of me. I can smell the smoke curling off him, smell the leather of his jacket, feel his heat radiating through the space between us.

His smile is lazy. Dangerous.

Malicious.

"You."

My pulse skips.

"I—I don't know what—"

"I'm talking about your sex tape that happens to be in my possession right now."

My brows knit. I'm about to genuinely ask him what he even means, before it suddenly hits me like a cannonball to the chest, so hard I almost physically stagger back as nausea flares up inside me.

No.

In flashes, it all comes back. Drinking the sparkling water. Starting to feel hot. The silly feeling. The inability to move. Gus and Seb carrying me over, taking my clothes off…

The camera facing the bed on a tripod.

Oh, my fucking God.

I want to throw up. I'm *going* to throw up. But all I can do is gasp and choke, a fish flailing on the dock, desperately trying to get back into the water.

"The darling ballerina of the Zakharova. The doting, perfect daughter of Congressman Kim…or, should I say, *Secretary* Kim now."

My mouth goes dry as he takes another drag of his cigarette.

"*Nico*—" I choke.

"No." His voice sharpens. "From now on, you only talk when I say you can."

I blink at him. "*Please*—"

He steps closer. "What the fuck did I *just say*?"

Before, on that rooftop, he had an edge to him. But even then, even after I'd watched him *kill someone*, he wasn't like this.

Now, he doesn't just look angry.

He looks like he fucking hates me.

"What. A. Fucking. *Scandal*," he hisses viciously through his teeth. "So, here's how this is going to work. You belong to me now, Naomi. *Entirely*."

My brain short-circuits, the walls of my reality closing in from every side.

“I—” My lips move, but no sound comes out. I take a shaky breath, trying again. “Why… *Why are you doing this*?” I finally croak.

Something ripples in Nico’s eyes, turning them from icy blue to an almost amethyst, vengeful darkness.

“Someone tried to hurt my family the other night.”

I nod weakly. “I—I heard. How’s Bianca—”

“That person was *your father.*”

No.

The world tilts and shifts under my feet. A roaring sensation fills my senses, clanging in my ears and pounding through my body to the point where I almost double over as the breath rushes out of my lungs.

“That…” I shake my head side to side, dazed. “That’s—”

“I’m not sure I can convey *exactly* how little interest I have in hearing the word *impossible* right now.”

My lower lip trembles before I capture it with my teeth, my pulse jumping madly under my skin.

“If you truly think that’s an impossibility, I’d say you might not know Daddy Dearest as well as you think you do. If at all.”

The cold sensation I feel dragging down my spine speaks volumes. And loudest, it speaks one thing:

What he’s saying *doesn’t* sound impossible.

Horrible? Yes. Appalling? Absolutely. *Nearly* impossible for me to wrap my head around.

Not completely, though.

A chill ripples over my skin as I hug myself protectively.

“But Daddy Dearest just got himself Secret Service protection, which makes going after him personally more than a touch difficult for me.”

Nico steps closer, blowing smoke out of the corners of his lips as his eyes, still purply-blue, eviscerate me.

“So I’m not going to go after Leonard. Instead, Naomi, I’m going to ruin *you*.”

He pulls a small card from his pocket and hands it to me. I barely even feel it when it slips into my hand. Then I glance down to it and see an address scrawled in tight black letters.

"Tomorrow. Eight a.m. sharp. Wear something pretty."

He leans in, his mouth near my ear.

"And remember," he whispers, "you’re mine now. My *property*. Am I clear?”

I don’t answer. I can’t.

He must take my silence as acknowledgement.

“Until tomorrow, then.”

Without another word, he turns and walks off stage, disappearing into the shadows he came from, trailing smoke and the singed smell of my soul.

I stand frozen for a long, drawn-out moment.

Then my legs give out and I collapse to the floor.

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NAOMI

THERE WAS a moment right as I reached the door at the address on Nico's card where I thought about running.

Spinning on my heel, sprinting down the stairs and out to the street, melting into the city until the sky fades to black and my legs give out. I pictured myself catching a bus to anywhere, getting off without a plan, changing my name, erasing every trace. Disappearing.

But the image that followed—one I couldn't shake and that made my stomach twist—was Nico chasing me.

Not running. Just walking, calm and unhurried, already knowing where I'll end up.

So instead, I opened the door and went up.

The ground floor was occupied by a Michelin-starred French restaurant, the kind where you need a connection just to get a reservation. The second floor was a tech startup…something to do with "AI-streamlined efficiency congruence", whatever *that* means.

But the third floor—the one I'm now on—is something else entirely. And it feels…*old*, like a time capsule to an earlier New York, especially contrasted

against the elegant restaurant and the glass-and-neon tech bro haven below.

The door is solid wood, with a framed sign affixed to it that announces in very 80's font *Lickity Splits: Hottest Girls in the Big Apple!*

I stare at it for a full thirty seconds.

A fucking strip club?

For a moment, I think this must be a joke.

Then I remember the look in Nico's eyes last night. The quiet commanding tone in his voice.

He wasn't joking.

I place a trembling palm on the door, my whole body coiled so tight I feel it might snap in half, and push it open.

The inside is all dark wood floors, vintage leather furniture, and lots of old bookshelves filled with…well…old books.

No neon. No strobes. No poles. No lap dances, thank God.

But there is *him*.

Nico.

He's sitting behind the desk at the far end of the large room, flanked by those high bookshelves on one side and a vintage bar cart on the other. The shades are drawn, giving the space a low, sultry, somewhat smokey-gauzy feel. Just a few dim, golden lights are on.

A cigarette dangles from his perfect lips, smoke curling lazily into the air. He doesn't say anything when I enter. Doesn't greet me. Just watches me with the same expression he had that night he caught me on the rooftop—cold, indecipherable, something I can't quite place.

Detachment?

I step inside, and the door clicks softly shut behind me.

The air is warm. I’m already sweating beneath my hoodie.

"You’re late," he finally says.

I glance at the wall clock. Two minutes past eight.

"Sorry," I whisper. “The subway—”

“I wasn't asking for an excuse.”

Nico leans back in his chair, the leather creaking underneath him. "Take off your sweatshirt.”

I hesitate.

His brows lift slightly, and something in my stomach plummets. I shrug off the hoodie, turning to drop it onto a chair next to the door. I’m left standing in just my long-sleeve t-shirt and leggings. I’m not cold, but I shiver anyway.

"Hmm," he murmurs, his gaze running over me. "Ballet Barbie reporting for duty. Though I did say to look *pretty.*"

I flush. My fists clench. I’m not sure if it’s out of anger or shame.

"But you didn’t come here to look pretty, Naomi. You came here because you *belong* to me now. Isn’t that right."

I… I don’t know how to answer that.

He doesn’t wait for me to try. He stands, slowly walks around the desk, and leans back against it.

Silence fills the room, building to an uncomfortable, noiseless crescendo.

“So…” I trail off, looking at the floor as my fingers pick at my cuticles. “What did you want me here for?”

I won’t lie. I debated this heavily all night, and all morning before I came here. I wondered if the address was a location where he was going to straight-up torture or murder me. I almost expected to walk in and see chains and hot irons, or a firing squad of mafia hitmen.

“I think I was very clear last night when I said you were mine now,” Nico growls.

I tremble.

That’s another thought I had: wondering if there was something equally dark but in a totally different part of the forest waiting for me here today.

“*You’re mine now*.”

The tone of his voice and the dark black hunger in his eyes had made it pretty clear what that might mean, even to someone like me.

“But in case I’m mistaken,” he purrs, “and I was *not* as clear as I could have been, let’s start with something simple." He takes a final drag of his cigarette and turns to stub it out in a crystal ashtray on the desk before turning back to me. His lips don't move, but a hint of amusement sparks in his cold gaze.

"Strip."

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach.

I blink. "W-what?"

“I’m quite sure you heard me."

He can’t be fucking serious.

“Nico—“

"You’re wasting my time. And I know you’re not stupid, which means you’re doing so purposefully. It's starting to piss me off.”

He rolls his neck, exhaling slowly.

“Have you ever seen someone you love almost blown to pieces in front of you?”

I flinch, as if struck.

“Nico, I’m so sorry—”

“*You* don’t have to be sorry. *You* didn’t order a car bomb delivered to my front door. Unfortunately, the man who *did* is untouchable. Equally as unfortunately, you are the opposite. Which is why you’re *mine* now, to do with as I please. And if that is having you strip in front of me while I watch…” He lifts a shoulder. “I would start making fucking peace with that,” he growls. “*Is that clear*.”

I swallow, nodding.

“Then stop wasting my fucking time. Strip.”

Hands trembling, I reach down and grip the hem of my t-shirt. My chest tightens as I pull it over my head and toss it aside. Then I slip my fingers into the waistband of my leggings. I slide them down slowly, stepping out of them hesitantly, until I’m standing in my bra and underwear, breathing shallowly.

Cold silence hangs in the room for a moment.

"That's not stripping," Nico says calmly.

My cheeks flame, but I continue.

Every motion feels like a betrayal. Not of myself, but my *idea* of myself. I’m not shy about being naked. I change in front of other dancers every day, even in front of male dancers backstage during quick costume changes.

But this is different.

This is *intimate*.

This is my power being taken.

And the way he watches me makes it worse.

He doesn’t leer. Doesn’t ogle. Just…*inspects* me, like I’m a specimen under glass. Cataloging what belongs to him.

I stand there trying not to shake, my hands making a feeble attempt to cover my breasts and sex.

Nico pushes away from the desk and begins to circle me slowly. I flinch a little when he takes my wrist, pulling my hands away from my body.

“Hmm,” he murmurs almost to himself, gaze dropping to my pussy. “Next time, I want you shaved.”

My cheeks flame with heat. I keep it *trimmed* down there. I mean, with the light-colored tights, it's just better. But I don’t shave completely either.

I swallow hard. "Why?" I mumble.

"Because that’s what I prefer," he growls. "More important, because I *said so*."

He walks around behind me. I flinch when I feel his warm breath on my neck.

"Desk," he murmurs. "Bend over it."

My body locks up.

"*Now*."

I still don’t move.

He sighs, annoyed. "Need I remind you what happens if you say no? What I *have*?”

I die a little inside as the mere mention of that disgusting tape of my assault, which he still thinks is a fucking *porno*.

"I—no," I stammer.

“Then go to that fucking desk and bend the fuck over it.”

Shame floods my body as I quietly walk over to his desk. I feel like I’m watching from outside my body as I stop in front of the heavy wooden desk.

“That’s part one. Now two…”

I close my eyes, my heart thudding an irregular staccato against my ribs.

“I—*no*,” I choke.

Nico sighs darkly right behind me. I can feel his heat against my bare back; smell his heady scent: leather, tobacco, masculine and clean.

“Why the fuck *not*,” he says darkly.

“*Because it's humiliating*,” I blurt.

I gasp sharply when I feel his lips brush against my ear.

“*Good*.”

I shudder.

Finally, I do as he commands and bend over the desk, my bare breasts and my cheek pressing to the polished wood when I turn my head to the side.

“Arms up. Grab the far edge of it.”

My pulse hammers in my veins. My body trembles and shakes with a swirling mix of shame, fear, excitement, and horror at *feeling* that excitement.

My palms land on the desk, the cool wood biting into my skin. My spine tenses. My legs tremble.

I can’t believe I’m doing this.

Who the hell am I right now?

Behind me, I hear the quiet, unhurried tread of Nico’s shoes against the floor. I can feel his heat at my back again, feel his gaze drifting over my skin like smoke.

“Spread your legs,” he murmurs.

I don’t move. I can't.

His hand comes down lightly on my lower back—not hard, not forceful.

But firm.

Commanding.

So I obey.

My whole body hums with shame and something dark I can’t name, and my cheeks burn as I feel exposed in a way that has nothing to do with nudity. It feels deeper, as if someone is peeling me open, layer by layer, displaying all the things I never meant to reveal.

Suddenly, his hand slides between my legs and cups my pussy firmly from behind.

I gasp, choking as my eyes snap wide, every muscle in my body clenching.

My skin is on fire. My heart is jackrabbiting. I brace for panic—expect it to rise up screaming after everything that happened to me not that long ago.

Strangely, it doesn't.

His fingers slide over my pussy lips, exploratory and possessive. My knees nearly buckle as I bite down hard on my bottom lip.

"We need to be clear about something," he says, his voice low and dangerous near my ear. "And we might as well get it out of the way now."

His hand moves slowly and deliberately, fingers stroking up and down. I shiver, shame flooding my face as something *else* floods *elsewhere* at the tingling, dangerous, exciting feeling his touch on my most intimate place brings out.

"When I say you're mine, I mean *all of you*. Every thought you have? Mine. Every inch of this body? Mine. This pussy?"

His fingertip parts my lips, sliding down to roll over my *mortifyingly* swollen clit.

"*Mine.* Do you understand?"

I don't answer.

Because, again, I can't.

I'm still trying to make sense of the fact that I'm not recoiling.

I'm *responding*.

My hips shift involuntarily. My breath quickens. Thick, hot, danger coils inside me.

And then suddenly, his finger plunges deep inside me, until his knuckles are pressed against my slick lips.

A soft, broken sound escapes my throat.

Oh God.

It’s a moan.

I just. Fucking. *Moaned*.

Nico lets out a low, quiet, cold laugh.

“I’d ask again,” he chuckles, “but I think we have our answer.”

My face crumples a little when he slides his finger out and then rams it back in; deep, hard, conquering. My eyelids droop and my nipples tighten against the glossy wood as his thick digit begins to stroke in and out of me. He curls it slightly against my front wall, stroking my g-spot as my legs tremble and shake.

“Are you fucking anyone right now, Naomi?” Nico purrs.

My breath hitches. I don’t respond.

The sharp *crack* of his palm against my ass sends me jolting forward with a yelp.

“Answer me.”

“*N-no*,” I whimper.

Not now. Not ever.

“*Good*.”

His voice is raw now, hungry in a way that scares me. How much my body wants to hear it again scares me even more.

Another finger joins the first, and I brace myself against the desk, biting down on my lip hard. The pressure, the stretch, the sheer wrongness of this situation—it should all horrify me. And maybe it does. But underneath that?

There's heat.

Shameful, desperate heat, building with every motion of his hand.

My thoughts are jumbled. Part of me screams that I should recoil from his touch, especially since I didn't ask for it. After what happened at that photoshoot, I know this should be making me shut down.

Instead, it feels like a balm smoothed over the experience.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he growls. “Like you were made to take what I give you. I love that you feel you should hate it... But that's a tough sell when your greedy little pussy keeps sucking my fingers back inside like you want more.”

My mouth drops open, but no words come out. Just panting, broken sounds. I grip the desk harder.

“Is that what you want, Naomi?” he taunts. “More?”

I whimper.

There’s no room for denial now. No space for thought. My body is trembling, slick with sweat and shame and something that I don’t have the words for.

Nico adds a third finger, and my world begins to blur at the edge. My eyes roll back like I’m possessed. My back arches, toes scraping against the floor and hips pushing back on their own accord.

It’s *almost* too much.

But, God help me, I want it.

“Look at you, taking these like you were made for them,” he growls, ramming all three of his fingers into my wet, eager pussy. “Don’t worry, Naomi. I’ll get this little hole nice and stretched so it can take my fat cock next time. You dancers are all about *stretching*, aren't you.”

My whole body tightens. The breath leaves my body.

“Now: you’re going to come on my fingers, and then you’re going to *thank me*.”

It hits me like a bomb.

A storm surge that breaks inside me with a wave of pulsing, helpless release.

And suddenly, I cry out as I shatter.

The orgasm explodes through me, wrenching my body as I twist and writhe. Nico’s fingers plunge in and out of me, finger-fucking me all through the release until I’m shaking and gasping for air as my hipbones press tight to the edge of the desk.

Nico’s hand comes to a stop. My world is spinning, my vision still blurry as my lungs scream for air.

“Well?”

I blink, not quite able to form words.

“Say thank you, ballerina,” he growls quietly. “Thank me for letting you come.”

Hunger, vicious and raw curls inside me.

“*Th—thank you*,” I choke.

Slowly, he pulls out his fingers. My body collapses, wrecked and shaking, on the desk. I can’t breathe.

“You may get dressed now,” he says simply.

I stand on shaky legs and reach for my clothes with fumbling hands. I still feel like I’m outside myself, watching someone else move. Not me, but someone who just let this happen, who didn’t stop it, who *moaned* when he touched her.

I pull my clothes back on, fingers trembling.

He just watches me.

“We’re done for today,” he says as he lights another cigarette.

“But when I say you belong to me now…” He exhales smoke. “I hope you understand what that means.”

I say nothing. I still can’t.

“Next time,” he adds coolly, “be shaved bare. And if you don’t own better lingerie, don’t bother wearing any at all.”

I nod, my face flaming.

I leave, and the door clicks shut behind me.

I’m shaking so hard, I can barely stand.

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THE RAVEN

THAT LAST SOUND she made plays on a loop in my head.

The soft, helpless moan—sharp, and sweet, and broken. The sound of someone coming apart in your hands when you thought they would scream. Fight.

She didn't scream. She *moaned*.

I can still feel her heat against my fingers. The way her legs trembled when I told her to spread them. The way her pussy clenched when I first slid my fingers inside her, like she'd been *waiting* for it—craving something without realizing it.

I'd like to say my full attention was on the way her tight little pussy clenched tightly around my fingers, her slick arousal coating them with glistening proof of her submission. On the way she came all over my hand like a greedy little thing.

But my attention was split between that and her face.

The way it crumpled, so poetically. The way her breath fogged on the polished surface of the desk. The way her eyes squeezed shut, like she was

trying to push away the pleasure and focus on what I know she thought she should be feeling.

Shame. *Guilt*.

Maybe she did feel those things, deep down. But that’s not what I saw on her face, with her mouth hanging open and her eyes clenched tight shut.

I saw raw need. Ravenous hunger.

"Raven."

I blink. The chamber snaps back into focus—the stone walls, the flickering candlelight. Tension swirls around the table like mist.

Carmine is watching from where he's sitting to my right, his expression concealed by his Hound mask. The Bull leans back in his chair across from me, one muscled arm slung over the back of it, his other hand twisting a glass of whiskey on the table in front of him. The Wolf, on my left, taps his fingers rapidly on the table, the tempo just shy of manic, as if he's physically incapable of caging in his crazy.

I honestly don't think he is.

Meanwhile, in utter contrast, The Stag is perfectly still, sitting casually in his chair, hands calm and unmoving on the armrests. Just…*watching*, in that —fine, I’ll say it—somewhat creepy way he has.

The Black Court is in session.

“Well?” The Bull says.

I sit forward, flicking ash from my cigarette into the tray. "Leonard Kim set up the bombing outside my home.”

All of them stiffen a little bit, and I hear Carmine snarl behind his mask.

“One of my informants put me in touch with a guy who said he worked for an outfit called the Obsidian Syndicate. I’ve personally never heard of them, but it seems they do wetwork, and this guy said they’d done a lot of jobs for ‘the Politician’. When I asked, he couldn’t tell me who the guy was. But then Congressman Kim happened to pop up on the bar TV, and this guy IDed him.”

A heavy, thick silence follows.

“I’m confused,” The Wolf mutters. “Why the fuck would Congressman Kim try to blow up your fucking sister.”

“The car was a present for *Vito*,” I growl. “But it doesn’t make it any less weird that a US Congressman would try to kill a retired don.” I take another drag of my smoke. “What we need to do first is figure out who the fuck this Obsidian Syndicate is. Then we go after them and peel off their fucking skin.”

No one speaks for a long moment. My eyes narrow behind my mask.

"*Well*?" I snap, jaw clenching.

The Wolf exhales heavily. "Look, man. I’m sure I speak for all of us when I say we’re sorry about what almost happened to your sister. But this isn’t Court business."

My eyes darken.

"Fuck you," I spit. "Of course it is."

"It’s *not*," The Bull says flatly. "Look, we’ve all got families. This life is dangerous. If we got involved every time someone took a swing at a family member, the Court would be at war every day, and that’s not what we do here.”

"That’s bullshit."

Carmine's hand lands heavily on my shoulder. "He’s right,” he mutters. "This thing with the Obsidian Syndicate is a Barone issue. Until they make it about The Court, then The Court stay out of it."

I glare at the middle of the table. My cigarette burns low between my fingers.

“This Obsidian Syndicate… They’re the ones sniffing around the Court," I press. "They *have* to be. I mean, we’re looking for who’s prying into us, and it’s not Kir, nor anyone we already know in New York. Well, here’s a powerful, well-connected group with the sort of reach where they’re working for U.S. fucking *Congressman*, right here in our city.” I tap my fingertip hard on the table. “There’s our connection. *Now* it’s fucking Court business.”

The Bull shakes his head. "We get what you’re saying, Raven. But until we have proof it’s them, I’m sorry. This is your family’s fight, not ours."

Carmine places a hand on my arm. The message is clear: *stand down.*

* * *

I LEAN against my bike outside the Barone mansion, mostly oblivious to the late-night 5th Avenue traffic zipping past me.

It’s funny: growing up here, our parents always made sure we felt like any other kids growing up in New York. That’s not some “aww, poor kids who grew up with a shitload of money and Central Park right across the street” bullshit. I’ve *always* known that I was born into a seriously privileged life.

A huge part of it was the relative peace in the mafia world when we were growing up. Dad was right when he was losing it in Bianca’s hospital room,

saying “this isn’t how it’s done anymore”.

It isn’t—and it wasn’t when we were kids, either. Vito and Giada let us play on the front steps, like millions of other kids playing on stoops in the Lower East Side or Brooklyn. They took us to soup kitchens to help out on weekends. Dad always made a point of personally delivering a couple of U-Haul trucks full of toys and turkey dinners with all the trimmings to about a half dozen less-then-affluent neighborhoods around the city every Christmas.

In short, we grew up aware of our privilege. And our parents made goddamn sure we understood that with privilege comes responsibility to help those around you.

I look at the front steps of the house, smiling when I remember skipping down those same steps with Vito dressed like fucking Santa Claus, about to make a whole neighborhood’s Christmas Eve.

Then my gaze drops to the street under my feet, and my smile fades like smoke.

The concrete is still scorched—dark black lines spidering outward from a flashpoint, like the road itself tore open and bled.

That’s where the car incinerated. Where Bianca almost died.

My little fucking sister.

I want to hit something.

No, some*one*. I want to chase down these Obsidian Syndicate motherfuckers and gut them one by one until I find the waste of oxygen who wired that car—and then do all it all over again.

Instead, I just stand here. Waiting.

The low, throaty growl of a V12 engine cuts through the dark, and a second later Carmine's black Lamborghini slides around the corner. The headlights wash over me and my bike, reflecting off the scorched street like fresh blood in moonlight. He pulls up to the curb and kills the engine.

I speak first when he steps out.

"What the fuck was that?"

Carmine shuts the door and exhales sharply. "That," he says tiredly, "was The Court making the right call."

I step toward him. "The right call? Doing fucking nothing is the right call?!"

"It's not their war, Nico," he murmurs quietly.

"It *will* be."

"Maybe. But right now?" He shakes his head. "It's not. It's a Barone issue."

I laugh, sharp and bitter. "So much for friends."

Carmine peers closely at me. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Play the loyalty card. You know better. You're the smartest guy I know, Nico. Don't pretend that you don't see the difference here."

I glare at him. He presses on.

"If The Wolf was having a problem with someone edging into his family's territory, you think we'd call a full Court session for it? No. We'd tell him to handle it. *Privately.*"

"And if that problem escalated into an attack on one of *our* people?"

“Then it would become our problem, and we’d go to war. But only then.” His voice is calm. Steady.

Sometimes I envy my brother’s ability to tune out emotions. No, not *ability*. It’s just…the way he’s wired. I clearly remember the moment when I was younger, maybe ten, and heard from Vito that Carmine wasn’t just “off” sometimes. He was certifiably psychotic. Dad told me—more gently than “Hey, your brother is a fuckin’ psycho”, obviously—because he thought I deserved to know.

Maybe he thought I’d be scared, but I wasn’t. I just remember thinking, “Well, that explains *a lot*.”

“I’m tearing this fucking city apart looking for whoever was a part of this bullshit,” Carmine snaps, jabbing a finger at the scorch marks on 5th Avenue. “So is Kratos. His whole family is mobilized—every Drakos soldier in the tri-state area. You think we’re going to let this go?”

“I think the Black Court needs to stop thinking inside the fucking box.”

Carmine exhales through his nose. “You know what *I* want to do? I want to walk into Leonard Kim’s office, flay off his skin, give him just enough painkillers and hook him up to just enough machines to keep him alive but in utter agony for at *least* a week, and then start slicing off his fingers, toes, and eyelids with rusty gardening shears.”

Not one word there is figurative or hyperbole, by the way.

“Let’s do it, then.”

“And bring down the full weight of the federal government on all our heads?” His eyes flash. “This isn’t some street war, Nico. Leonard Kim as a congressman was bad enough. Now that fuck is a White House *Cabinet member.* You so much as sneeze in his direction and we’ll have half of

Washington crawling up our asses with wiretaps and RICO charges. We go after Leonard Kim directly, and we're raining down the apocalypse on our family."

He's right. And I hate that he's right.

"Carmy, I *know* it's this Obsidian Syndicate who's been poking around The Court. If it's not Kir Nikolayev, the number of entities in New York who would, one, have the balls to try and dig into us, and two, have the connections and resources to do so, is basically *zero*. This outfit isn't some little gang. If they're doing dirty for a sitting U.S. Congressman, they're next level." My gaze holds his. "You *know* I have a nose for shit like this."

Carmine rubs a hand over his jaw, glancing up the street. "I'm not saying you're wrong…"

"Then help me make the fucking connection."

"I don't need to," he says, his voice flat. "You and your dive-bar meet with Mario proved that the Obsidian Syndicate was behind the bombing, at the behest of Secretary Kim. That's hard facts, not conspiracy theories. Those fuckers are behind almost killing our sister. That's the part that matters."

"Of course that's what fucking matters," I spit back. "Carm—"

"Nico," he growls tightly. "I'm thinking about our sister almost getting blown apart. I'm thinking about Kratos on his knees by her hospital bed, holding her hand like it's the only thing anchoring him to his sanity. I'm thinking about our niece or nephew, who hasn't even taken a breath yet, but has already gotten a taste of what this life can cost."

His voice is ragged, cracking around the edges.

"And if *your* priority isn't finding, torturing, and killing every single person involved in that bomb," he growls, "then I don't know what the fuck we're

even talking about."

"You know damn well that's my priority."

Carmine exhales, nodding. "Good. Good."

He glances up at the house. "Wanna come in for a drink or something?"

"Nah," I say, reaching for my helmet. "I need a ride to clear my head."

He claps a hand on my shoulder before turning to go. "Don't do anything stupid."

I wait there for another minute, watching the lights through the windows, thinking about everything this family is and the blood and sweat it's taken to build it.

In this world, one wrong move can have everything you know go up in smoke.

So, no. I'm not letting this go.

I *will* find the thread that ties the Obsidian Syndicate to the Black Court. If they're doing jobs for a U.S. Cabinet member, they're connected. Powerful. More of a threat than Carmine wants to admit.

He's got an empire to lead. And I get that *that* is his priority as King.

But I'm no king.

The bike growls beneath me as I tear through the city, weaving through traffic like the asphalt itself owes me blood.

Eventually, I coast to a stop outside a narrow brick building sandwiched between a defunct yoga studio and a bodega. It's one of those old walk-ups that looks like it hasn't been renovated since the seventies.

I chain the bike, squeeze through a side gate down the alley behind the building, and jump up onto a dumpster. I use the fire escape to sneak up to the roof, then make my way to the ledge opposite the closest building, barely twelve feet away.

I find an old milk crate and drag it over, settling down and slipping a cigarette between my lips. I light it with a glowing flicker, inhaling as I lift my gaze to the small apartment on the top floor of the building across from me.

Then I see her.

Naomi drops her dance bag to the floor and slumps onto the couch like she's been hollowed out. Her hair's messy. Her shoulders sag.

She's sucking and chewing on her bottom lip.

That…*does something* to me.

Despite her father being who he is, with his wealth and connections, Naomi's apartment is surprisingly small.

Actually, scratch that: it's a shithole.

Water-stained ceiling, peeling paint, just one bedroom. It looks like somewhere a college dropout with dreams of becoming either a playwright or an OD statistic would live, not the daughter of a congressman.

The disconnect is fascinating.

I watch as Naomi stands. She peels off her sweater, arms limp with exhaustion. Then her leotard.

Then her tights.

One piece at a time, she strips away the costume she wears for the rest of the world, unaware there's someone in the shadows watching. I take a long drag of my cigarette, dark need throbbing low in my stomach as I watch her pad barefoot through her apartment, in nothing but a pale green sports bra.

I've already seen her naked today. I've had my fingers inside of her greedy little cunt, felt her shatter for me when she came.

Now I want more.

I want everything.

Every inch. Every sound. Every tear and tremble, every whispered plea.

And the mystery surrounding why I want that is about as intriguing as the one where I haven't told anyone, not even Carmine, about the thumb drive I got from Mario—the one with the video of Naomi and those two motherfuckers.

…The one I haven't actually watched since playing just the first bit on my laptop outside that dive bar.

That would be mystery number three: why the thought of watching it makes me crave violence and destruction.

My phone buzzes in my jacket pocket, pulling me from my thoughts.

It's The Stag.

"Sorry about earlier," he growls.

I say nothing for a few seconds.

"I understand it's not part of what we do," I finally mutter back. "Doesn't mean I have to *like* it."

He exhales slowly. “It’s what we agreed on when we started this whole fucking thing. You know that. The point was always to be a corrective force, not a *collective* one. We’re not an army, Nico. Not the fucking UN.”

I roll my neck, pressing my fingers into my shoulders. “I know.”

He clears his throat. “That said, I believe this Obsidian Syndicate is something the Court needs to have on its radar.”

He’s quiet for a moment before he speaks again.

“I know someone in the UK who might know something about them. The Syndicate, I mean. I can reach out and connect you…?"

I exhale. “If you could, I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll set something up and let you know.”

He hangs up without a goodbye or anything like that.

The Stag is like that. And by “that” I mean “weird, creepy, and poster boy for antisocial tendencies”.

Thank fuck we’re friends.

I slip the phone into my jacket. When I look back, Naomi’s walking slowly from her bedroom into the bathroom, turning on the light and disappearing for a second.

Then she steps back out, naked now, and walks to her bed.

Steam starts to drift from the bathroom—a hot shower or bath she’s started to run, I’m guessing.

I watch her tie her hair up in a messy topknot before she turns to the bathroom. Then she pauses and swivels instead to the full-length mirror, her

bare ass to me, the full splendor of her nude dancer's body reflected in the mirror.

Her lip catches in her teeth *in that way*, and my dick thickens and swells. I watch her hand wander down her body until her fingers run over her pussy.

I unzip my jeans, pulling out my swollen dick and wrapping a hand around it in the darkness. I stroke slowly, gliding up and down then fat, veined shaft, watching Naomi's eyes flutter half-shut. Her hips roll, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip as she slowly strokes her clit with two fingers.

Now, what are you thinking about, little ballerina.

Or WHO…

It'd better be fucking me, and what happened this morning.

It doesn't last long.

Neither do I.

Maybe it's because I've been walking around with blue balls all day. Whatever it is, when Naomi slams a palm against the mirror to steady herself, her legs shaking and bowing as her fingers plunge into her pussy, I follow her over that edge.

My cock pulses and surges in my hand, hot ropes of white cum spurting from the head and splattering onto the rooftop.

Naomi shakes herself from what she just did. I watch with gleeful satisfaction as her face turns a dark shade of magenta, then she quickly darts into the bathroom.

I stay where I am, watching.

Waiting.

It’s close to forty-five minutes later when she emerges, toweling off her body.

My eyes pierce the divide between us, zeroing in on her pussy.

Shaved bare.

Good girl.

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NAOMI

I WAKE BEFORE THE ALARM. Again.

Not because I'm well-rested. I'm not. My eyes feel like they've been scrubbed with sandpaper, and my body is stiff and heavy. Like I slept underneath a weight.

But my brain is awake. Circling.

Yesterday keeps replaying on a loop in my head. His dark, commanding voice. His scent curling around me—leather and smoke, masculine and clean. The feel of the desk beneath my palms and my cheek.

His thick fingers pushing into my needy pussy.

That moment where I stopped thinking, and just *moaned*.

Moaned for him, *came* for him, and shattered all over his hand.

Last night, as steam from the shower filled the bathroom, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, remembering every single filthy facet of the experience, and rubbed my clit until I came again.

I'd like to say it was about reclaiming control. Or about closure.

But that would be a lie.

The truth is, I am *fucking insane*.

I was thinking about the way he looked at me. The way he touched me, as if I belonged to him utterly. The way he said *"good girl"* like it was both a reward and a punishment.

Praise and damnation.

Heaven and hell.

Something's wrong with me.

Broken. Bent. Corrupt.

I stare at the ceiling for a few minutes longer, willing my racing heart to slow down, asking these thoughts to scatter.

But they don't. They just burrow deeper.

Eventually, I drag myself out of bed and into the bathroom.

My reflection looks tired in the mirror—lips raw from being bitten in my sleep, dark shadows under my eyes. I step into the shower and rinse off quickly, closing my eyes and letting the water stream over me. When my hands slide between my legs and I feel the bare, shaved skin there, I startle for a second, pausing like a skipped heartbeat. Then it all floods back.

He told me to. So I did.

A huge part of me wants to hate him, and *myself*, for obeying his command and doing something to my body I don't normally.

At the same time, there's a flicker of heat on my skin when my fingers slip over the softness between my thighs.

The bare sensation is…new. But not unpleasant.

Kinda sexy, actually.

I shove the distracting thoughts away and shut off the water, stepping out to apply lotion and light makeup after toweling off. I dig through my drawers until I find the closest thing to “sexy lingerie” that I own—a matching pair of black lace panties and bra, slightly see-through. I bought these months ago, I forget why. I’ve never actually worn them.

It’s not like I’ve ever had anyone to wear them *for*.

For a minute, I start mentally assembling a more put-together outfit: maybe something more “office appropriate”. A dress? Then I frown, turning to glare at myself in the mirror.

Why the *hell* am I dressing up for him?

Why did I just put on lingerie? Or shave my pussy last night, for that matter?

Because he told you to.

I swallow as a dark, whispering presence deep inside me smiles villainously.

And you like *that he told you to.*

I shudder as I pull my gaze away from the mirror, ditching any ideas of dressing up and reaching for a hoodie and leggings.

* * *

Lickity Splits: Hottest Girls in the Big Apple!

That sign still makes me cringe.

It’s so absurd it would almost be funny—if I weren’t walking through it a second time to offer myself up to the monster on the other side of the door.

Nico is sitting back in his chair when I enter, feet kicked up nonchalantly on the desk. His sleeves are rolled to the elbow and his collar is open, revealing eyefuls of his swirling tattoos. His dark hair is swept back, his chiseled jaw clenched, and his blue eyes slice across the room, pinning me to the floor like a nailed-down shadow.

His brow arches just enough to send a shiver through me that snaps my spine straight and makes my core clench.

“Close the door.”

His voice is low. Unhurried. Like a man discussing dinner reservations, not issuing orders to a woman he blackmailed into submission less than a day ago.

I ease the door shut behind me with a soft click.

He doesn’t make a move from where he sits sprawled behind his desk like a mad king, eyes locked on me.

“Take off your clothes.”

My mouth dries instantly. It’s not a question.

He regards me like a hunter watching a deer that is deciding whether to run or stay frozen.

My throat bobs and I finally work up the courage to speak.

“Why—”

“Because I fucking said so, Naomi. That’s why. Because I know it humiliates you. Because your fucking father sent a *bomb* to my fucking

front door. And since *he*'s managed to lock himself behind a wall of secret service agents, and *you* haven't…" He lifts a shoulder, gesturing broadly. "Well, here we are."

Darkness curdles inside me.

I've tried to get in touch with my dad *seven times* since the night Nico slipped out of the shadows of the Mercury Theater while I was alone on stage and told me in no uncertain terms that I was "his" now.

Since he told me *why* I was his.

And as horrifying as it is, I'm still thinking it's *not* impossible beyond a shadow of doubt that he might be connected to what happened to Bianca, no matter how horrible it was.

People say you have to crack a few eggs to make an omelet. My dad is the kind of man who would crack *dozens* of them if that's what it took. He'd burn the whole henhouse down. I know this.

It's not ruthlessness, just driving ambition. The end *always* justifies the means for him. Getting to the White House with a Cabinet position has always been his goal, with the unspoken follow-up of targeting the presidency one day.

…You don't have those kinds of lofty goals unless you're willing to break every egg on the planet.

It's not like I think my dad personally sent a bomb to the Barone house. That *is* impossible. Single-minded as he is, his career still comes first, above everything.

But it's *not* impossible to think he might be involved with the people who sent it. It's not like we ever had mobsters coming to the house when I was a kid. But I do remember him having secretive, sometimes shadowy people

over, how they'd lock themselves away in his office and talk in hushed tones.

Seven times I've called Dad since the other night, and still no answer. Not even a voicemail. Not even a "Can't talk now" or "I'll call later" text.

All I got was a boilerplate message from one of his aides: "Congressman Kim is on the Hill today with back-to-back committee meetings and pre-confirmation briefings. He'll follow up as soon as possible."

Like I'm a constituent, or a freaking reporter.

Not his daughter who would love to hear him say "No, sweetheart, I had nothing to do with almost blowing up your friend and coworker."

Even if it's a lie.

"So, all of this is because you think my father—"

"No." Nico cuts me off bluntly. "Not because I *think*. I fucking *know*." He nods his chin at me. "Your clothes are still on."

I swallow.

"To be clear, if your father was here facing my wrath instead of you, *he* wouldn't be stripping for me," Nico says evenly, his eyes never leaving mine. "He'd be going head-first out the fucking window with his severed balls stuffed down his throat. So pretty please, with a cocksucking cherry on top, remove your *fucking* clothes before I cut them off."

A shiver tingles down my spine. Without another word, I turn and shyly peel off my hoodie. Fold it over the nearest chair. My shoes come next. Then my t-shirt, then the leggings.

I'm down to the lingerie now, and I pause.

Waiting.

Wanting him to say something.

To comment. To approve. To notice.

The corner of Nico’s mouth lifts just slightly.

“Were you hoping for a review of your bra and panties, ballerina?” he says dryly, harsh sarcasm in his tone. “Take them off.”

Shame floods my face as I reach behind me and unclasp the bra, letting the straps slip down my arms before the whole thing falls to the ground. The panties follow. Cold air kisses my skin as I bare myself to him again.

The room is silent as he looks at me from his chair behind the desk, blue eyes sweeping over me with slow, clinical precision.

My skin is on fire, and he hasn’t even touched me yet.

His gaze pauses between my legs, and he smirks. “Apparently you can remember basic commands. That’s a good sign.”

Dickhead.

Even as I mutter it to myself, there’s an electricity in the air that wraps around me like static.

Nico points a finger to the floor beside his desk.

“Come here.”

I begin to step forward.

“Crawl.”

I freeze.

“What?”

“Crawl. Not walk.”

His lips curl darkly in the corners as heat floods my face.

“*Why*?”

His voice drops. “Again, because I fucking said so. And because I want to watch you on your hands and knees like my little toy, doing my bidding. Fucking *crawl*.”

My face ignites. A thousand shards of humiliation prick my skin.

But I drop to the floor.

Each movement forward feels like I’m tearing myself apart, one fragile piece at a time. And yet, there’s a heat between my legs, pulsing with every drag of my knees across the polished wood for every second I’m like this—naked, obedient.

I hate him for this.

I also hate that my body *doesn’t.*

Nico pushes his chair back a little as I approach, a king waiting for entertainment, then taps the desk in front of him.

“Up.”

I stand, vainly fumbling to cover my nudity this close to him, and turn as if to sit on the edge of the desk.

“No no no.” Nico shakes his head, his eyes darkening as they sweep over my body. “On your knees. Facing away from me.”

Heat rushes to my face so fast I think I might faint. But I do it—I climb onto the cool, wooden desk, get on my hands and knees again, and turn away from him.

“Chest and face on the desk,” he murmurs.

Holy shit.

I can feel his eyes burning into me, barely a foot away from my most private places. But I obey. I lower myself down until my chest presses to the desk, my back arching instinctively, realizing with an electric throb just how exposed I am.

How bare and vulnerable.

I feel his breath on the backs of my thighs, and my teeth clamp down on my lip.

“Spread yourself for me,” he purrs.

I tense.

“Reach back,” Nico continues. “Grab your ass and *spread yourself* for me.”

I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

But I do it.

My fingers curl into the soft flesh of my ass and pull. I’m shaking, humiliated, and yet—

That throb is back.

Stronger than ever.

“What were you thinking about,” Nico murmurs, “when you rubbed that messy little pussy last night?”

My body locks up as my eyes bulge in shock.

I say nothing.

“I asked you a question,” he growls.

I don’t answer. I *can’t.*

So he answers for me.

“Was it what happened yesterday?” he taunts. “Did you think about my thick fingers in your tight, wet pussy while you came like a good little slut?”

I shut my eyes.

But I don’t let go.

I keep holding myself open for him, breath shallow, legs trembling.

Suddenly, I gasp sharply when I feel something cool and slick drizzle down my ass and drip between my thighs.

My eyes fly open and I start to turn.

“Ah-ah-ah. Stay right where you fucking are,” Nico commands in a brooding, almost sultry tone, his voice low.

I shiver when he dribbles more of whatever-it-is between my cheeks, letting it drip over my asshole and pussy lips.

I suddenly realize that it’s lube.

The soft *click* of the bottle being set down is deafening.

“I think it’s time we explored some new territory,” Nico murmurs.

My entire body tenses.

“I—” My voice breaks.

“I didn’t tell you to talk,” Nico murmurs. “I told you to hold yourself open.”

I bite down on my lower lip hard enough to sting, fighting my rising panic. Suddenly my eyes bulge as something presses teasingly against my ass. I open my mouth to say something.

Then I shut it again.

He didn’t tell me to talk.

Heat rises to my face, my cheek throbbing against the cool wood of the desk. I can feel Nico twisting whatever it is—smooth, thin, with a rounded tip of some kind. Maybe rubber, or silicone.

Then he starts to push. My breath catches, my body trembling at the unfamiliar sensation of penetration back there. As he slowly twists it into me, I can feel myself tightening around the gradually widening object. Just as I get to the point where I’m about to tell him that I can’t, that it’s too much, the whole thing suddenly thins back down.

I shiver at the slight popping sensation of the object as it slips into my ass, my ring tightening around the base of it, a much wider, flatter part resting against me.

Holy fuck. It’s a butt plug.

My mind and body try to process the invasion as my ears ring with both shame and dark excitement.

It’s not even in that deep, but we are officially *miles* into uncharted waters. It feels like we’ve crossed a line I didn’t know I had.

And…I don’t hate it.

I *hate* that I don’t hate it.

“Good girl,” Nico murmurs.

The praise is more electrifying than the plug.

A creak behind me tells me he’s just lounged back in his chair. I tremble, feeling his eyes *locked* on me—on my bare pussy, and my ass gripping the plug he’s just slipped inside.

I’m completely on display for him, and I’ve never felt sluttier.

…And that’s not necessarily the worst thing.

“Now,” he murmurs thoughtfully behind me. “I could use a drink. Whiskey. On the rocks.” I can hear his fingers tap-tap-tapping on the armrests of his chair.

I exhale shakily, pushing myself up, my face throbbing. The plug is still in there, snug and foreign and horribly erotic.

I slide off the desk onto trembling legs, unable to face him as I turn to start walking toward the cart.

“No, Naomi,” he murmurs darkly. The commanding tone instantly makes me stop.

“Crawl.”

I’m shaking as I get to my knees, my core on fire as the shift in position sends an electrical tremble radiating out from where the plug is stretching me. I crawl to the bar cart. Mercifully, he doesn’t comment when I stand to scoop ice from the silver bucket into a crystal tumbler and then add a few fingers of whiskey.

When I turn, glass in hand, Nico clears his throat.

“Again, crawl.”

I freeze.

How the fuck am I supposed to crawl and carry a full drink?

“Balance it on your back,” he says quietly, like he’s reading my thoughts.

I spin, silently looking at him. He returns my gaze, impassive, a brow lifted, waiting to see if I’ll argue.

I want to.

I really, *really* want to.

…I don’t.

Instead, I kneel. My hands shake slightly as I reach back awkwardly and set the glass on the small of my back.

It’s *freezing*, and makes me gasp and flinch. But it stays put.

“Now crawl,” Nico says softly.

It’s slow going. I have to concentrate to keep my hips level, my back steady.

But I do it.

By the time I reach him, my muscles are trembling. But the glass is still in place.

Nico nods. “Good girl.”

Again, my pulse flutters at the words. Again, ridiculous, horrible warmth floods my belly. I hate that I like hearing that. That I *crave* it.

He reaches down, removes the glass from my back, and sets it on the desk.

Then he reaches into a drawer and pulls out a white silk ribbon.

“Hands behind your back.”

I obey, a stretch tugging across my shoulders as I lace my fingers at the small of my back.

Nico reaches down and loops the ribbon around my wrists, binding them tight together, but not painfully so.

Then he places the whiskey glass back on the small of my back.

“No spilling, or there’ll be punishment.”

Something ragged zaps through my core.

Are you fucking serious?

He straightens, clearing his throat and pulling his chair back to the desk. Then he opens his laptop.

I swallow, my pulse thudding.

“H—how long am I—”

“You’re a side table today,” he says without looking at me. “Tables don’t talk.”

I’m kneeling. Naked. Bound. *Plugged*. Holding a drink on my back.

And yet somehow, the little voice deep inside me isn’t screaming in rage.

It’s fucking *purring*.

The position is difficult to hold. My thighs are shaking. My back starts to ache.

Nico makes a call on his cell, immediately switching to Italian which I didn’t realize he spoke. His tone grows more forceful, his eyes locked on his laptop screen. At one point, he reaches down and plucks the glass from

my back, taking a slow sip before setting it back down, making my skin turn to gooseflesh.

My legs start to cramp and shake. I've been kneeling in one position for almost five minutes. My core ripples.

Then, without warning, a spasm shudders through me.

Oh, shit.

Momentarily, the glass wobbles.

And spills over the lip a little.

Whiskey runs over my skin in a cold trail. I gasp, going rigid.

Nico turns his head, looks at me, then at the whiskey dripping onto the floor, then back to me.

"I'll call you back."

He sets the phone down on his desk, taking a slow, deep inhalation as he reaches up and strokes his jawline.

His smile is slow and cold.

"Well then," he murmurs. "Punishment it is."

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NICO

SHE FLINCHES when the whiskey spills.

She lets out a gasp, sharp and high in her throat, like the cold shocked her nerves and jolted her brain back into her body.

Slowly, I turn to her.

There's something so goddamn beautiful about this moment—her bare skin shining under the office lights, knees red from the hardwood floor, the curve of her spine glistening with the line of liquid sliding down it and over the tight swell of her ass.

Her hands are still bound behind her by the white silk ribbon, wrists crossed at the small of her back. Knees spread.

And her face…

Her face is perfectly wrecked, ruined beauty: eyes wide. Cheeks flushed. Lip bitten raw from nerves, or trying not to beg. Maybe both.

Probably both.

I let the silence stretch out before I reach down, pluck the glass from her back, and set it on the desk.

Then I stand and roll my neck.

“Up,” I say, voice monotone.

She looks at me, staring, like she didn’t quite hear.

I raise a brow. “Stand *up*, Naomi.”

She struggles a little, her body stiff from kneeling, but she gets to her feet. Her shoulders curl in on themselves, trying to shield what’s already been exposed.

I step behind her and reach for her shoulders. She shivers when I touch her.

Good.

I press one hand between her shoulder blades and push forward until her chest hits the desk.

“Feet apart,” I say. “Back arched. Don’t fucking move.”

She trembles but obeys.

I let my hand hover over the curve of her ass.

“You spilled my drink,” I say casually.

“I’m sor—”

“I didn’t ask for an apology.”

She clamps her mouth shut.

“Count,” I say.

Then I bring my hand down.

The sound echoes sharply through the office.

“One,” she choke-whispers.

I smile.

I *like* that broken, wrecked, whimpered sound.

I spank the other cheek, letting the sting blossom and her skin turn pink beneath my palm.

“Two.”

Her voice wavers.

I keep going. Spank after spank after spank, alternating sides. Letting my hand linger just a little longer after each strike. Watching her unconsciously wriggle and arch.

Squirming.

Like her body is fighting itself, trying not to come apart.

And *fuck me*, is it mesmerizing.

I glance past her shoulder, looking at her cheek pressed flat to the desk, eyes squeezed shut.

Her mouth is open, her breathing ragged. And that bottom lip—bitten red and trembling.

That doesn’t look like a woman being punished to me.

That looks like a woman desperately trying not to come.

I growl low in my throat, bringing my hand down harder than before.

“Keep counting.”

“*Nine*,” she gasps with a hitching sound.

Without warning, I slide my hand between her thighs. I grin instantly when my hand cups her pussy.

She's fucking *soaked*, her heat pulsing against my hand. I slowly run two fingers through her slippery wet lips, then pull them away and show her.

"Look," I growl, holding them close to her. "Dripping," I murmur. "*And all over my desk, too*."

She keeps her eyes shut, and her face turns a deeper shade of red as a needy sound whines in her throat.

I lean in, my mouth near her ear.

"Tell me why that is, ballerina."

She shakes her head.

I tsk. "No answer? Well, maybe you'd like to hear *my* theory."

I slide my fingers back between her thighs and slowly begin to rub her clit.

"I think you're dripping all over this desk because you *like* being punished. *Used*."

She whimpers under my touch. My reply is to sink two fingers into her wet cunt. Naomi chokes on a moan, toes twisting against the floor as her hips writhe.

I curl my fingers just enough to make her gasp.

"I haven't even fucked you yet, and your pussy's already acting like it's *mine*."

I lean in closer, letting my words sink into her skin.

"Keep pretending you hate this, Naomi. I'll just keep proving you wrong."

Her hands are still bound behind her back with the ribbon. Her body is quivering from the spanking, from shame, from the feeling of my fingers sliding through her soaked pussy, filling the room with the wet sound of her lies.

And I haven't even really started yet.

"Get back on the desk," I say quietly.

She hesitates, blinking rapidly. Then she scrambles up; it's a little awkward with her wrists still tied. I step in and catch her when she nearly slips, gripping her by the waist and hoisting her like she weighs nothing.

Her skin is fever-warm. Her thighs tremble as I make a few adjustments, positioning her exactly how I want her.

Like my own personal little *fuck toy*.

When I'm finished, she's lying on her back across the desk, her feet flat against the surface, knees raised.

Legs apart. Completely open for me.

Completely mine.

I look down at her—at the flush spreading over her chest, at her dark, rosy nipples, tight and aching, at the pure, trembling need etched across her face even as she valiantly tries to hide it.

At the pinkness between her thighs, and her swollen, glistening pussy.

I reach down and undo my belt. Naomi's eyes go wide and her mouth hangs open in a mix of shock, nerves, fear, and lust as I undo my pants, reach inside, and wrap a hand around my fat cock.

“Are—” Her words catch as her face flames. “*Are you going to fuck me*?” she whispers.

It’s a little fearful.

A little bit innocent.

And hugely *desperate*.

It *breaks* something in me.

She doesn’t know what she’s asking for, not yet.

But she will.

I pull out my swollen, thick cock, my hand wrapping around the base and giving it a slow stroke.

Naomi’s jaw fucking *drops*, her eyes lasering in on my dick as I grin smugly.

What can I say? I’m blessed.

…And pierced, while we’re on the subject.

Naomi sucks in a breath so sharp she could cut herself on it, *staring* at my cock.

I just stand between her spread legs, stroking myself, letting my gaze drag over her flushed, trembling, taut body.

Slowly, I bring my cock to her pussy. I don’t push inside. Not yet. I just let her feel it as I roll my hips and glide my swollen shaft through her messy lips.

Her hips twitch upward, as if her body’s trying to pull me in all on its own.

“Do you *want* me to fuck you?”

She bites her lip so hard, I think she might bleed.

“No,” she breathes.

I spank her ass. Hard.

“Lying earns more punishment,” I say darkly. Then I lean over her, letting my cock rub along her slick, hot little pussy again.

“But no,” I murmur, mouth brushing her ear. “I’m not going to fuck you…”

I smile as her thighs tense, her hips shifting under me.

“Not *yet*.”

She whines in the back of her throat.

“I *am* going to come using one of your greedy little holes, though.”

I lean back, grinning inwardly as I watch her try to process that as I move around the desk, slowly and steadily.

She keeps her eyes on me, following my every move until I’m standing behind her head, her body still laid across the desk, feet planted on the wood, knees apart, wrists bound, hair spilling like ink over the edge.

I brush her cheek.

“Open your mouth, ballerina,” I say.

Naomi’s eyes are wide open, starting at my throbbing cock. She nervously chews at her lip again, but I notice the way her nipples harden even more. The way her thighs clench.

The glistening, dripping arousal between them.

“Of course, if you’d rather,” I murmur quietly. “That plug has probably stretched you out enough that I *might* be able to cram my fat cock up your

tight little asshole, if you'd like to go that route instead…"

Naomi flushes dark red.

But she doesn't look at me furiously, or with horror, or distaste. Just like she's desperately trying to hold something back.

Slowly, she shifts and drops her head back, letting it hang over the edge of the desk and opening her pouty, soft lips.

Her gaze meets mine, and something deep and helpless in it shudders.

"Good girl," I murmur, running my thumb along her top lip before sliding it into her mouth.

She moans softly as I press it against her tongue.

Then I pull it out and grip her jaw with one hand, the other wrapped around the base of my cock.

Her mouth stays open, waiting.

Wanting.

"Eyes on me," I say quietly.

And then I slide in: just the head at first—thick, hot, stretching her lips *wide* as her eyes bulge in surprise.

Fuck. Me.

I bite back a deep groan as her lips wrap around my head. As her tongue tentatively licks the very tip, toying exploratorily over my piercing.

Fucking *fuck*, I think I just fell in love with this mouth.

Instinctively, I rock my hips forward, groaning again as her jaw stretches to its limit. She gags slightly when I hit the back of her throat, but doesn't pull

away.

God, she’s so clearly not very practiced at this. I can feel it in every hesitant flick of her tongue. But there’s no hesitation in her eyes.

Only heat. Shame. *Desire.*

I thrust a little deeper. Her eyes flutter, her throat tightening as she sputters slightly. Spit and precum bubble where her lips are stretched taut around my cock.

I begin to fuck her mouth in slow, deliberate strokes, one hand gripping her hair, the other steadying her head.

I’m not gentle.

I’m going to push her.

I’m no sadist, but this is about control. It’s me using her exactly how I want—and her *letting* me.

Spit dribbles down her cheeks as she chokes and moans around me, her jaw opening wider. Her brows knit when I slide deeper, pushing into her throat. She gags again, a broken sound echoing in the space between us.

I don’t stop.

I twist my fingers in her hair, wrapping my other hand around her throat to pull her slightly closer and angle her head perfectly.

“Look at you,” I rasp. “Taking my dick like a good little fuck toy. Like a greedy, eager little cocksucker.”

She moans around me, eyes fluttering closed for just a second—then opening again, wild and hazy.

Her tongue is *everywhere*. Her lips suck greedily. She's drooling on her own neck and she doesn't even realize it.

My hand slides over her chest, palming her breast. Her nipple is hard as glass, and I roll it between my fingers, grunting when her body arches, even in this position.

I slip my other hand down, between her legs, to her clit.

She jolts. Moans. *Whimpers.*

I grin.

"What a *hungry* pussy," I taunt, fingers rubbing tight circles over the little bundle of nerves that has her trembling. "Making *such* a fucking mess, like a good girl."

She moans around my cock, shuddering. Her tongue begins to work faster as it swirls around my swollen head.

"Say thank you, Naomi," I groan. "Thank me for your punishment. Say 'Thank you, Sir, for *wrecking me*'."

She groans deeply, eyes rolling back in her head as she hollows her cheeks around my cock. She mumbles words that *might* be what I just told her to say. Either way, the vibrations from her attempts have my balls drawing up tight.

Fuck, I could come just from watching her pretty lips struggle to take it all.

I reach over her with both hands now, plunging two fingers from one into her pussy, sliding the other down to grip the base of the small plug. Her whimpers grow louder, needier, and more desperate as I start to twist it slowly, letting the friction tease her ass.

She doesn't just moan. Doesn't merely whimper.

She goes *berserk*.

Naomi starts to writhe and shake and shudder. Her knees tremble, her toes curling against the edge of the desk as I stroke two fingers in and out of her dripping wet pussy and twist the plug in her ass.

I groan deeply, ramming my cock into the back of her throat. She hums and moans around me, sucking wetly and loudly, the wet, squelching sound of my dick fucking her mouth filling the office.

I can feel it…the clench. The shift in her breath. The stuttering tension in her legs.

Then she breaks, like a wave crashing against the shore.

Her spine arches and a cry of release wrenches from her throat as her mouth goes slack around my cock. A high, strangled sound escapes her, muffled and desperate, and then her whole body seizes up, the orgasm ripping through her like a live wire.

She's coming.

From my fingers on her clit. From my cock down her throat. From the shame. The control. *Me*.

And I lose every shred of restraint I had left.

I grip the sides of her face and fuck her mouth harder, deeper, groaning through gritted teeth as my own release barrels down on me.

When it hits, it's like a bomb.

My hips jerk forward, my cock pulsing between her lips as I spill into her mouth. Her throat tightens around me as she struggles to take it, and the sight of her—spit-slicked, cheeks wet, eyes wide and mascara running, the last traces of surrender—hits me harder than anything ever has.

With a final groan, my balls empty the last of my sticky cum down her throat, and I slowly pull out.

Something dark and twisted deep inside me revels at the mess I've made of her.

Her lips are red and swollen. Her makeup is trashed. Her chest rises and falls in sharp, heaving bursts. She's covered in cum and spit.

She swallows.

Then her eyes lift to mine, and I feel that thing I've been trying not to name welling up.

Not lust.

Not power.

Something much, much worse.

I should say something cold. Dismissive. Cruel, even. Push her back down into that shame spiral to keep the upper hand.

Instead, I hear myself say, "You'll never belong to anyone else. Understand?"

She doesn't speak, just nods, eyes still locked on mine like I've taken something sacred from her. Maybe I have.

I tuck myself back into my pants. Adjust my cuffs. Reclaim the distance.

I don't really know what the fuck just happened between us. But the game has changed. I'm not the same man who walked into this room an hour ago. And she's not the same girl I told to strip and be my side table.

Naomi slides weakly off my desk, not meeting my eyes as she twists herself free of the ribbon. I turn to catch her about to clean her face off.

“Don’t.”

She stiffens, turning toward me. I shake my head as I hand her back her clothes.

“Don’t what?” she says quietly, still not really looking at me.

“Don’t wipe it off,” I growl. “Leave my fucking cum right there on your face. And keep it there for the rest of the day.”

This time she does look at me, her jaw dropping.

“*What*?” She shakes her head. “I can’t—”

“You can. And you will. So that everyone who sees you knows you’re *spoken for*,” I murmur darkly.

She gulps. “I’m not riding the subway with…with…” She blushes pure beet red, averting her eyes. “With *cum on my face*,” she finally manages to whisper.

I scowl. “You’re right, you’re not. You don’t ride the subway anymore. My driver will take you home.”

Her face is still red as she raises her dark eyes to me, something sparking in them. “I—I’m going to the theater after this. I can’t—”

“You can. It’s just men that I don’t want to see you like that.”

She frowns, shaking her head. “I’m confused. You *do* want people to see me like this? Or you don’t?”

Fuck. I’m twisting even myself up here. I don’t *know* what the fuck I mean.

I clear my throat as she pulls on her leggings.

“My driver will take you to the theater. And you’ll keep *that*”—I point to the cum on her cheek and chin as she blushes darkly—“right there, so they all know you belong to someone.”

She’s zipping up her hoodie now. “There are male dancers in the company, too.”

Shit.

I suddenly remember the guys who dance with the Zakharova—in particular, this Vaughn fucker Bianca is always talking about who seems to be *very* friendly with the girls…

“And I’m guessing your driver is a man—”

“Fine. Go wash your face off,” I mutter, nodding my chin at the bathroom.

Well, so much for *that* grand plan of sending her home with the flag of a conqueror raised over freshly annexed territory.

Naomi nods and turns, walking into the bathroom and shutting the door. A minute later, she steps back out with a freshly scrubbed face, devoid of cum, spit, or smudged mascara.

Fucking *bummer*.

She starts to walk to the door. Halfway there, she frowns and turns back to me.

“Nico?”

“M-hmm,” I grunt, slipping a cigarette between my lips.

“How long am I—”

“Mine?” I lift an easy shoulder, raising my eyes to hers. “Until whenever.”

Her lips press together. “I… I need an end date.”

“Well, that’s a shame. And a good lesson in not always getting what we want.”

“*Nico*—”

“Convince your father to come down here and stick a gun in his fucking mouth,” I snap, “and we’ll talk. Until then, you’re mine. Forever.”

That last word kinda sneaks in there and comes out swinging.

Weird.

Naomi shakes her head. “That… *No*.”

I arch a brow as I flick the lighter and touch the end of my cigarette to it. I inhale, the cherry glowing at the tip before I snap the Zippo shut.

“Yes.”

She shakes her head again. “*No*, Nico.”

“Or what?”

She stiffens, pursing her lips.

“Or you’ll *what*, Naomi?”

She drops her eyes, brow furrowing as she picks her cuticles. “I…nothing. I just—”

“Fine,” I mutter, sucking on the smoke. “Six months. You’re mine in every way for six months. *Then* we’re done.”

Her eyes widen in disbelief. “Two.”

“Six.”

“Three.”

“Still six.”

Her brows knit. “Four. *Please*.”

“Seven.”

“You can’t—”

“Just did.”

She shivers. “*Fine*,” she mumbles. “Six.”

“Masterful negotiating skills.”

She shoots me a look. “You *do* understand that your sister is one of my best friends, right? And that I had nothing to do with—”

“But your fucking father did,” I growl, spreading my arms. “So again: here we are.”

She nods quietly, looking down.

“Six months.”

“Six months,” I parrot.

She scuffs her toe on the floor. “And that includes…”

“*Everything*.”

Her eyes snap to mine, full of fear and excitement.

“And yes, Naomi—that definitely includes fucking you.”

“When?” she mumbles.

“Hmm. That depends.”

She frowns. “On?”

“On if you like surprises.”

Her face heats and her eyes widen.

“What about consent?” she blurts.

I shrug. “You’re giving it now.”

“What?” She frowns. “N-no, I’m not.”

“It’s implied.”

“Like *hell* it is.”

I sigh, rolling my eyes. “Fine. We’ll use a safe word.”

“And what’s the safe word?”

“Dealer’s choice.”

She nods, thinking. “Fine. Odile.”

“Excuse me?”

“Odile,” she repeats. “In *Swan Lake*, there’s Odette, the white swan that the villain has put under a spell, and Odile, the black swan. She’s the villain’s daughter.”

“How *poetic*. Fine. Odile will be your safe word.”

“And when I say that, you stop, no matter what?”

Begrudgingly, I nod. “Yes.”

“In that case…” She looks right at me. “Odile.”

“Yeah, that’s not how it works.”

Her brows furrow. “I don’t understand—” She gasps as I surge across the room, forcing her back until she hits the wall by the door, my hands planted on either side of her, caging her in.

“In that case, little swan,” I murmur, “I’ll just have to explain better next time.”

She shivers. “Which will be?”

“When you least expect it. Sort of like this.”

I never planned for it to play out this way. The point was to tear her down. Ruin her. Destroy Leonard’s sweet little chaste ballerina daughter and show him that hiding behind secret service agents won’t stop me from making him bleed, even if it has to be through her.

But those plans collapse exactly half a second before I grab her jaw, slide my fingers back into her hair, and crush my lips to hers in a brutal, claiming kiss.

She stiffens at first. But as my tongue demands entrance, pushing into her mouth to dance with her own, she starts to melt for me.

Her lips open wider. Her tongue swirls with mine as her hands fall lightly against my chest.

A shiver skitters through her body as I steal the breath from her lungs and the innocence from her skin.

I kiss her until my teeth get involved. I start to see black and red as I crush her against the wall, sinking my teeth into her bottom lip. Naomi whimpers against me, gasping into my mouth as coppery wetness floods both our tongues.

It’s only then that I pull away.

My eyes land on the smear of blood on her lips. Without thinking, I reach out and run my thumb slowly over it, smearing the red across it like a brand.

A mark.

A giant blinking neon sign that simply says “mine.”

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NAOMI

I DON'T REMEMBER the last time my body felt this heavy.

Everything aches: hips, thighs, calves. Even my jaw.

Gee, I wonder why…

I stare up at the ceiling for a long time, trying to convince myself to move. The sunlight seeping through the blinds cuts across the wall in sharp lines, carving the morning into slices I still can't gather together.

Yesterday's rehearsal feels like a blur—it's a miracle I got through it at all. It felt like it happened to someone else.

But it was me. It was *my* body that stumbled. *My* body that shook on stage. *My* mind that kept flashing back to Nico's hand in my hair, his voice in my ear, his cold whiskey glass on my back, making me fumble and falter.

Kuzmina pulled me aside again at the end of it.

She didn't scold me this time. Didn't threaten to replace me. She just… *looked* at me. Like she saw through every layer of me in a single glance.

"*I cast you as the Swan Queen because you are very talented, even though you like to doubt yourself,*" she said quietly. *"And because I see both Odette*

and Odile in you. Play the Black Swan, but don’t let the role consume you."

I nodded.

But I didn’t feel like Odette.

I felt I was already halfway to becoming Odile.

I managed to hold it together until the end of rehearsal. Then I stayed late. I ran through every sequence again and again. Until my muscles screamed and my brain had no more room for his voice. His growl. The flash of his eyes.

After I dragged myself home, I could barely climb the stairs to my apartment.

Then I had a text from Nico reminding me to be at his office promptly at eight again tomorrow and not to “bother with panties this time”.

I could barely feel the tingle that text would normally give me, and instead replied that I wouldn’t be coming tomorrow, since I’d stayed late after rehearsal.

Not because I was scared.

Not because I didn’t want to.

But because I need a fucking day to recover.

I roll over reach for my phone, the screen lighting up in my hand, and I see his reply, waiting for me like a figure lurking behind a doorway.

NICO

Be at my office in 30. Or I come find you and make sure your ass remembers whose it is.

My core twists.

My skin flushes.

I swipe to unlock the screen, heart pounding in my throat.

Another message comes in as I reread the first one, and I groan. I have read receipts turned on.

NICO

Don’t make me come over there and fuck your mouth again, ballerina. I won’t be so gentle this time.

My breath hitches.

There wasn’t anything remotely gentle about the last time.

…*Like you minded?*

Oh, shut up, self.

I read it again.

And again.

Then I throw the covers off.

I am *not* letting him show up at my apartment. Not when he means it, and not when I’m terrified to admit how much a big part of me *wants him to.*

I sit on the edge of the bed staring at his last message, glowing like a lit fuse.

NICO

Don’t make me come over there and fuck your mouth again, ballerina. I won’t be so gentle this time.

I shouldn’t be reacting like this. I shouldn’t feel this low, hot ache pulsing between my legs.

But God help me, I do.

I fire back a response before I can second-guess myself.

ME

I told you, I'm not coming today. Rehearsal ran late, and I need rest, stretching, and recovery. It's part of my JOB.

A few seconds pass.

NICO

I'm positive I can assist when it comes to the stretching.

My jaw drops. My face throbs as I type again.

ME

Seriously. I can't do both every day. I'm going to burn out.

The typing dots hover again.

NICO

Get your ass over here before I drive over there, put you on your hands and knees on the floor with your panties stuffed in your mouth, and fuck you until you can't move for a week.

NICO

…Which is actually sounding more and more appealing the more I think about it. With you immobile, we can skip discussions like this. I'll just keep you at my place as my own little fuck toy.

My mouth goes dry.

I mean, *Jesus*.

ME

You can't speak to me like that.

NICO

Six months. Anything. Making you squirm when you hear language you're unaccustomed to falls under that umbrella.

I feel my core tighten.

ME

You don’t know where I live, anyway.

NICO

Naomi

Just my name.

No punctuation.

My breath catches.

NICO

My driver literally gave you a ride home yesterday.

Fuck.

I let out an addible groan as my face twists.

He *does* know where I live. Of course he does.

He probably knows my building’s door code, which window I sleep next to, and what *groceries* I bought last week. If I don’t go to him now, he’ll show up.

And if he shows up...

My face burns.

Part of me *wants* to see what he’d do. To test that line.

But I don’t, not really.

Not yet.

I snap into motion, tossing my phone onto the bed, heading straight for the shower. The cold water wakes me up faster than coffee. I scrub quickly, efficiently, trying not to think about the fact that I’m already *wet.*

Ten minutes later, I'm dressed, out the door, and walking fast.

Not to Nico.

At least, that's what I tell myself.

* * *

THE HOSPITAL ROOM IS WARM, bright, and smells like the lavender and other fresh flowers filling the space.

Bianca lights up the second she sees me.

"Hey!" she chirps, her voice slightly weak but full of that stubborn, unshakable energy that's uniquely her.

She's propped up in bed, a little pale, hair twisted up in a messy bun, cheeks still slightly hollow—but smiling.

It nearly makes me cry.

I manage to smile back as she holds her arms out. "Quick, come hug me before someone realizes you're here and tells me to rest. Dude, I am *so tired* of resting."

I laugh and cross to her, hugging her as gently as I can, trying not to fall apart.

"Oh my *God*, have I missed you!" I groan before I pull away. "You look good!"

She snorts. "I look like hell, but thanks. And the baby's okay. We're *both* okay. That's what matters."

I brush a stray piece of hair from her forehead. "Everyone's been talking about you nonstop. We were so fucking worried about you."

“I was, too,” she says softly. “And about the little one.” She shivers, but then her eyes sparkle. “Don’t tell Kratos. He’s already acting like I’m made of glass.”

I laugh again, but it’s forced.

Because under all the sweetness and light is a gnawing weight in my chest that I can’t explain to her, or share.

Hi, yes, super close bestie, I’m hooking up with your brother in an insane, probably toxic arrangement based on blackmail involving a tape of an assault that I’m still not sure how to process.

What’s up with YOU?!

Bianca and I are great friends. But no friendship is strong enough that you can tell someone you crawled to their brother naked on all fours. No friendship survives “your brother” and “butt plugs” in the same sentence.

I sit beside her on the edge of the bed. We catch up. I pointedly do not steer the conversation toward her family once.

She complains about the food. I tease her about being a princess on bedrest.

“Ooo!” she suddenly blurts. “Wanna hear the heartbeat?”

I blink. “Wait, what? You can hear it already?”

“Yeah!” she grins, her face flushed with excitement. “I mean, it’ll be all the time later.” Her hand drifts to her belly, still barely showing. “But they gave me a recording of the one they picked up yesterday. I’ve probably played it twenty times already.”

“I would *love to*!”

She pulls her phone out, taps a few times, and holds it up.

At first, the sound is so faint I almost miss it.

Then, there it is: steady. Rapid. Light, like butterfly wings.

And it's *beautiful*.

Bianca frowns slightly at me.

"Hey…you okay?" she asks quietly.

I nod. "Oh, for sure."

Liar.

But how do I tell her that I'm not? I mean, she just got *car bombed,* and I'm moping about…what…my feelings not being organized?

Please.

Yes, I'm spinning. Yes, I'm tangled up in something I don't understand. Yes, her brother has his hands around my throat in more ways than one, and I don't know if I want him to let go.

But I say none of that, because I'm a coward.

Instead, I just tap her phone, listening to that beautiful heartbeat again.

"So, do you know yet, boy or girl?"

"No."

I startle, then smile when I turn to see Kratos filling the doorway to Bianca's room. He's wearing dark jeans and a plain black tee that do nothing to hide his massive size. His arms are crossed, tattoos clearly visible on both forearms.

He grins at me, then his eyes sweep the room like he's assessing it for threats before he nods to himself, seemingly satisfied.

“Yeah, still no monsters, ninja assassins, or freak waves waiting for you to turn your back so they can get me, love,” Bianca sighs with a roll of her eyes.

Kratos gives her a look, but I can see a hint of smile on his lips as he crosses the room to her bed. He bends down, kissing her softly before he pulls away again and nods at me.

“How goes, Naomi?”

I get that Kratos terrifies most people. I mean, it’s like talking to a literal giant. He’s close to seven feet tall, arms as thick as my torso, shoulders as big as my head, and the rest of him is essentially made from iron.

It’s not like I actively *try* to imagine my friends in intimate situations. But considering how petite Bianca is…

Yikes.

“Just stopping by to say hi to my girl here,” I grin.

“She play you the heartbeat yet?”

I grin. “Yeah.”

Kratos beams from ear to ear. “That’s the heartbeat of a Spartan warrior, I’m telling you.”

Bianca sighs. “And if it’s a girl?”

Her husband shrugs. “*Still* gonna be a bad-ass motherfuckin’ Spartan warrior.”

Bianca and I both laugh.

“You wait, it’ll be triplet girls,” I eye him. “And they’ll *all* dance.”

Kratos snorts. “If you’re trying to scare me, try harder. I’d *love* all girls.” He nods thoughtfully, like he’s thinking about it. “I’d be a *great* girl-dad.”

Bianca rolls her eyes. “You understand that there’s more to the job besides scaring off boys?”

“Details, details,” he grumbles.

Just then, the door opens and a doctor walks in with two attending nurses, explaining that it’s time for routine bloodwork and a fetal stress panel.

“I’ll give you guys some privacy,” I say, leaning down to hug Bianca again, still trying to shove aside the guilt that I’m hooking up with her freaking brother.

“Come visit again soon?” she pleads.

I grin as I squeeze her again. “Obviously.”

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NAOMI

It's windy enough that I wish I'd brought a jacket when I fled my apartment earlier to avoid the mad prince.

Or that I hadn't worn a *skirt*

I quicken my pace, heading down 5th Avenue toward the wind-sheltered entrance to the back alley that runs behind the Mercury, where we all tend to congregate before rehearsal. For a second, I wonder about getting a coffee, but when another gust of wind blows up my damn skirt…again…I nuke that idea.

Instead, I pause just long enough to look longingly across the street toward Urban Grind Café. Maybe I can put on my puppy-dog face and convince Vaughn to go grab—

The very man I was just thinking about steps out of Urban Grind, coffee in hand.

Perfect.

I shout his name, but the traffic between us is too loud this time of day for him to hear me. I wave my arms, but he's not looking in my direction. I groan, then yank out my phone and text him "oat milk latte

pleeeeeeaassse!” with about ten heart emojis afterward. But after I hit send I watch him, and he doesn’t make a move to reach for his phone.

Dammit.

Then I stop, my brow furrowing as I look at him again.

Something seems…*off* with him. He’s standing half-shadowed by the café awning, sipping his coffee. But instead of the leather jacket which is basically his all-season look, he’s wearing a gray windbreaker with the hood pulled up.

He looks…well, *off*.

Brooding, sure. But there’s also a tension in the way he holds himself. A stiffness in his posture, like a spring coiled too tight.

For a second, I’m confused: it looks like he’s staring right at me, but there’s no hint of recognition. I wave my arms again, wondering if he’s just being extra weird today. Then I realize he’s actually staring *past* me, down the length of the alley behind the Mercury.

I almost call out to him again, but there’s something in his demeanor that stops me. In all the years I’ve known Vaughn, I’ve never once seen him look like this. It’s like he’s not seeing anything at all.

Like he’s *gone somewhere else.*

I shake it off and duck into the alleyway, my footsteps echoing on the brick as I make my way toward the back entrance.

Whatever that was, it’s his own thing, not mine to interrupt.

And seriously, who the hell am *I* right now to be giving people shit for being lost in thought?

The wind dies down as I step off the main street and head into the alley. Lyra's perched on an old crate by the back door to the theater, sipping what's probably her second espresso of the morning, legs crossed in ripped leggings, headphones looped around her neck. Milena stands beside her, eying Lyra's coffee longingly.

Milena always makes me grin. I mean, the girl comes from *serious* wealth and power. Her father, Marko, is the head of the Kalishnik Bratva, one of the families that sits on the Bratva High Council alongside the likes of Reznikov-Tsarenko, Kashenko, Volkov, and Javanović.

But the girl *really* tries to cover that up. Not out any sense of embarrassment, more that I think she just wants to "fit in" a little more.

The key word there, of course, is "tries". Most of the time, her efforts are to various degrees of success. Like today, for example: she's wearing ripped jeans and an oversized men's white dress shirt knotted at the midsection, with a tank top underneath.

But the "I just grabbed this from wherever" shirt is Armani, those shoes with the red soles are flipping Louboutins, and I'd bet my last dollar that the giant glittery rock on her necklace is an *actual* diamond.

Evelina bounces on her toes in front of them, too full of energy to stay still. Her twin long blond braids whip behind her as she turns to me.

"Naomi!" she grins widely.

Evelina is also a Bratva princess. Unlike Milena, though, she leans right the hell into it.

She can be described in one word. One *color*: pink. Specifically, Barbie pink.

That is *not* to say that she's a ditz. She's just fully embraced that she's a princess, and that she'll most likely have to marry a mafia prince not that far down the road. And given both those realities, it's like she's made a conscious choice to approach life with an infectious, bubbly spirit and the energy level of a Jack Russel puppy. She's also one of the sweetest, most genuine girls I've ever met, and it's *impossible* not to like her.

She practically skips toward me, grabbing my arm with both hands before leaning in dramatically, like she's about to spill some great secret. "We're talking about Bianca," she stage whispers.

This is another reason I love her. She'll have this dramatic buildup where you think she's going to tell you this Earth-shattering news, and it ends up being "I could use a coffee".

I make a face as I join the group. "I went to visit her this morning," I say softly.

"Oh, good," Lyra says, standing. "I mean to go earlier, but I…we…" Her face turns crimson before she coughs and glances away. "Something caught me."

For a second, I catch a glimpse of a dark bruise on her neck, near her collarbone.

…Or is it a *bite*?

"How's she doing?" Lyra continues, clearly trying to change the subject as she tugs at the neckline of her hoodie to cover the mark.

"She's good," I nod. "Resting. Bossing people around already."

Milena grins. "Of course she is."

We laugh, and it feels… normal. Which feels good, after my giant dose of *not* normal, courtesy Nico Barone.

“I still can’t believe it,” Evelina murmurs. “I mean, someone actually tried to *kill* her. That’s *insane*.”

“Not that insane,” Milena says, her tone blunt. “We live in a world, Evie, where our families have serious enemies. We forget that until shit like this happens.”

Evelina’s brow furrows. “I didn’t *forget*.”

Milena softens. “Just saying, *solnishka*… It’s easy enough to pretend we’re all normal bunheads until something goes boom.”

The whole group of us goes silent for a couple of long seconds.

Lyra glances at her phone and groans. “Shit, it’s almost time. I need another shot of espresso before I can face Kuzmina today.”

Milena arches a brow, nodding at the cup in Lyra’s hand. “How many of those bad boys have you had today?”

Lyra shrugs, running her hand through her red hair. “I dunno. A…few? I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“And why is *that*?” I tease with a grin.

She shoots me a look, her face reddening. “Nothing,” she mumbles. “I just had…things to do.”

“Yeah, more like had things *done* to you, *Mrs. Barone*,” Milena snickers.

Lyra flips her off, still blushing as the rest of us crack up.

“I’ll come with,” Evelina pipes up.

“Me too,” Milena says, brushing past Evelina and jerking a thumb at her. “Can’t let this one order another lavender-mocha-unicorn nightmare.”

“Hey, I *like* that drink,” Evelina mumbles.

“I know,” Milena tosses over her shoulder. “But it’s like giving a toddler a bag of pure sugar, which is why we’re banning it.” She turns to me. “You coming?”

I shake my head. “I’m just going to chill here before the sadism starts.”

“Want anything?”

“Uhh… Maybe an oat milk latte?” I ask.

The moment they’re gone, I feel a presence behind me. For a second, I stiffen, smelling a hint of masculine scent mixed with tobacco. My heart lurches as I whirl. Instantly, the breath whooshes out of me.

“Uh… What the fuck was *that*?” Vaughn says, lifting a brow questioningly at me.

I shake my head. “Nothing… You just startled me, I guess.”

“Well, I *am* quite startling.”

I roll my eyes. Then my brows pull together in confusion.

“Wait: where did you come from?”

Vaughn shoves his fingers through his hair. “Think you know the answer is *no fucking idea*. But I do know wherever it was, they broke the mold, baby girl.”

I roll my eyes.

Vaughn and I are tight in a squabbling siblings kind of way. I mean, he's like that with all the girls in the company, at least our immediate circle. But for some reason, he and I just click a little better than most.

Enough so that while no one else does, *I* happen to know the joke behind "no fucking idea".

Vaughn was found abandoned as a small kid with some amnesia issues. He went into foster care until he was sixteen, at which point he declared himself a legally emancipated minor.

Dude's been through some *shit*. But somehow, he turned out kinda spectacular.

But right now, I'm confused. He's already dressed and ready for rehearsal, in cutoff sweat pant shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt that shows off the huge swaths of tattoos covering his well-defined biceps, forearms, shoulders, and even ribs through the huge armholes.

"How the hell did you get changed so fast?"

Vaughn gives me a weird look. "Huh?"

"How…" I shake my head. "I didn't see you go inside. How did you dress so fast?"

He arches a brow. "You feeling okay?"

I shake my head, but I shove the confusion away.

There's a not so small chance that yesterday's events involving Nico are very much still messing with my head. Big time.

"You just missed the crew," I say, changing subjects.

"I know."

I glance at him. “You trying to avoid us all of a sudden, Mr. Bancroft?”

“Avoid *you*?” He clutches his heart dramatically. “*Never*. Avoid being the token queer in the girl squad?” He lifts a muscled shoulder. “I mean, *sometimes*, yeah.”

I give him a half-smile. “Totally fair.”

“And it feels like sometimes it gets tragically overlooked that I also happen to enjoy fucking pussies?”

I snort a laugh. “Please. You do an excellent job of reminding everyone exactly how *not* particular you are when it comes to holes and fucking.”

Vaughn grins. “That feels vaguely like an insult?”

“I’m just saying you’re a popular guy.”

“Fuck, now I feel slut shamed.”

I smirk. “Your words, buddy.”

He chuckles deeply and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, slipping one between his lips and lighting it. Then his eyes drag to me as his head tilts slightly.

I shift uncomfortably, feeling like a bug under a microscope. “What?”

“You look… *tussled*.”

I freeze. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” he says, waving vaguely at my face. “Your hair’s a little wild. Kinda flushed. Like you’ve been doing some *extracurricular* cardio.”

I flush all the way to the roots of my hair. “I do *not* look tussled. And I thought you were quitting,” I mutter, jabbing a finger at his cigarette.

“Those are terrible for you.”

“She said, radically changing the subject,” he snickers.

“I do not look *tussled*,” I huff again. “And if I do, it’s because I just came from the hospital, ass. I went to visit Bianca.”

He holds his hands up in mock surrender. “Fine, fine,” he sighs as he takes another pull from his cigarette before glancing at me. “Her giant husband there?”

I nod.

“Man.” Vaughn shakes his head, grinning. “I seriously don’t see how they conceived a child. Like, from a purely mechanical standpoint.”

I snort.

“I’m serious!” he laughs. “I feel like it would be like a St. Bernard or a Great Dane fucking a Chihuahua.”

“Coke can?” I offer, raising a brow.

Vaughn laughs uproariously. “*Two* coke cans. Stacked.”

I’m still wheezing with laughter when he ambushes me out of nowhere.

“So,” he says conversationally, “wanna tell me who *you’re* fucking?”

I almost choke as my breath catches in my throat, and I feel my face throb with heat as I stumble for a response.

“E-excuse me?” I stammer.

Smooth, self.

Vaughn smirks. “Don’t play innocent, baby girl. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I’m not—” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“You’ve got that look. Like a sex glow. The I-haven’t-slept-properly-because-someone-ruined-my-circadian-rhythm-with-their-*dick* kind of look.”

I vainly try to will the flame in my cheeks away. “You’re delusional.”

“Am I?” he singsongs. “I see bruises.”

I stiffen. “What—”

He steps closer, tugging on my sleeve before I can stop him and yanking it up to show the slight bruising from the other day in Nico’s office.

“*Nice*,” he says approvingly. “Rope? Or is that silk?”

“Vaughn!”

I yank my arm away.

Silk, for the fucking record…

He just laughs, unbothered. “Relax, you know I don’t judge. I just want to know who’s responsible for the ‘freshly ravaged’ vibe you’re rocking.”

“There *is* no ravaged vibe,” I hiss.

“Sure.” His gaze drops lower, zeroing in on the hem of my skirt. “Bet you’ve got more bruises under here.”

He reaches teasingly toward the hem.

I bat his hand away. “Don’t you fucking *dare*!” I laugh.

He grins wider, fingers feeling again for the edge of my skirt. “Come on. Bet you fifty bucks you’ve got handprints on your—”

He doesn’t finish the sentence.

Because in a blink, he’s *gone*, yanked away from me and slammed against the wall with a hand at his throat and a face snarling into his.

“Touch her again and I’ll cut your fucking hand off.”

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NICO

I'M GOING to rip his fucking arms off.

That's the only thought I have as I watch Naomi from the alley entrance, every muscle in my body tensing.

She's standing with some guy—tall, built, lean, good-looking, covered in tattoos.

It fucking *pisses. Me. Off.*

I don't even know why. I don't *want* to know why, because I'm not interested in psychoanalyzing myself or this tangled situation with Naomi right now.

But for now, let's call it a purely territorial thing, for simplicity's sake.

She's mine. He's standing too fucking close to what's mine, putting his goddamn *hands* on what's mine, and it makes me think violent thoughts.

Elegantly simple, uncomplicated, cause and effect.

The cause is him stepping over a fucking line. And the effect will be my fist smashing into his perfect nose and wiping the cocky grin off his charming face.

Naomi laughs too loudly at something he says, slapping his bicep playfully.

My eyes darken.

Not because I'm jealous.

But because I don't fucking *share.*

She was foolish enough to skip coming to my office this morning—and now that I've strolled into the middle of her flirting with this motherfucker?

Now I've gone from inconvenienced and annoyed to *vengeful*.

The guy laughs, his hand darting to the hem of her skirt.

And *that's* when the fuse lights.

I don't think, just charge down the alley like a runaway train, and I don't slow down until I plow into him. The guy grunts as I yank him away from Naomi and slam him up against the brick wall behind her.

"Touch her again and I'll cut your fucking hand off."

For a moment, there's stunned silence in the alley behind the theater. It's just the three of us, since the last of the other dancers were filing inside as I was charging down the alley.

But then Naomi's voice cuts through the quiet.

"Nico!" she blurts. I can tell she desperately wants to sound incensed or angry, but her tone comes out fractured and halting, her breath catching sharply. "What the *fuck* are you doing?!"

Before I can answer, the motherfucker I've got pinned to the wall wrenches in my grip, spins, jams an elbow into my ribs, and makes me wince as he breaks my hold on his throat.

Shit. Up close, I'm suddenly realizing that he's fucking *ripped*. Not massive like Roman, but toned as fuck, and *strong*.

Whatever preconceived notions I've had about male ballet dancers goes out the damn window. Because instantly, it's crystal clear that this fucking guy knows how to handle himself in a fight.

He dodges the first punch I throw his way. But the second one lands with a satisfying crack across his cheekbone and the side of his eye. He stumbles back, hissing a curse. But he barely needs half a second to shake it off before he's charging right at me.

Fuck.

He slams into my midsection like a fucking linebacker, and we hit the ground hard. My back slams against concrete, the wind leaving my lungs with a whoosh.

Yeah, he's a lot stronger than I expected.

But I can guarantee I'm a lot meaner.

He snarls when I slam a forearm up into his mouth, splitting his lip. But I barely have time to savor the sweet feeling of marring his pretty face before he cracks a brutal punch to my jaw. We roll once—twice—before I pin him, my forearm pressed to his throat again, knuckles ready to break something else.

"*Nico!*" Naomi's voice cuts through the blood rushing in my ears. "*Stop it! What the hell are you doing?!*"

The sound of her voice distracts me and I lose my focus.

Shit.

The guy uses the moment to crack another fist across my jaw. Then he throws me off him, shoving me backward before he scrambles to his feet, panting, his face flushed, his right eye already swelling.

I'm ready to go again. I *want* to go again, so I can fuck up the rest of his face.

But Naomi shoves herself between us, slamming both palms against my chest and forcing me back.

Her eyes are glinting with fury.

"Are you fucking serious right now?!"

I'm breathing hard, my jaw clenched, eyes still locked on the guy behind her. He groans, wiping the back of his tattooed hand across his bleeding lip before he sinks back against the wall behind him.

Then he smirks.

"Guess I know now who you've been banging, baby girl," he mutters dryly.

My entire body clenches, my voice dropping low. "Call her that one more time…"

He shrugs, grinning like a lunatic, blood painting his teeth before he turns and spits it onto the ground. His eyes lift to mine, a pure "fuck you" look on his face.

"Baby. Girl," he says slowly. "Do something about it, fucker."

I lurch forward again, but Naomi puts a hand to my chest again and glares hard enough to make me pause.

"*Stop it*," she snaps. "My *God*. This is one of my best friends. And—newsflash—he *fucks men*, idiot."

There’s a pause.

The guy clears his throat. “I mean, I fuck a *lot* of girls, too—”

Naomi whirls on him. “You are *not* helping.”

The guy holds up his hands in mock surrender before he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, slipping one between his bloodied lips. He paws around in his pockets before he grumbles and sticks out a hand.

“Vaughn Bancroft.”

I glare murder at it. Then take it.

Hard.

“Nico Ba—”

“Yeah,” Vaughn mutters. “I know who you are.” He lowers his gaze, then lifts it again. “I’m sorry about what happened to your sister,” he adds, losing the sneering tone for once.

I just nod, jaw still tight.

Vaughn pats his pockets again. I begrudgingly yank out my own lighter and toss it his way. He catches it in one hand with a smug, cocky nod of his chin.

“Thanks,” he mutters, deftly lighting the cigarette in his lips before throwing the lighter back. He takes a drag, his eyes locked on me for a few seconds before they flit to Naomi. Then back to me. Then to her again.

He grins lopsidedly, raising a brow.

“So…” he points between us with his cigarette. “When’s the wedding?”

My eyes narrow. Naomi's cheeks turn crimson as she purses her lips.

"It's not *like* that," she says testily. "It's…" She shrugs, not looking at me. "We're just friends."

Vaughn chuckles to himself, shaking his head. "Sure you are," he says dryly.

"I would *appreciate it*," Naomi mumbles, her face still red, "if you kept this to yourself." She shoots him a look that still pisses me off. "Like I've kept certain aspects of *your* life to *my*self?"

Vaughn nods slowly. "Heard, loud and clear." He glances back to me, not seeming to care about the daggers coming out of my eyes aimed in his general direction. He turns back to Naomi. "So, you two are just fuck-buddies then?"

"Surely you've got a tutu to put on and some twirling to do," I grunt at him.

Vaughn chuckles. "Any time you feel like dancing again, blue eyes, let me know."

"I'm free right the fuck now," I snarl.

Vaughn flicks his cigarette away and rolls his neck. "Let's see who spins like a little bitch when—"

"*Vaughn*," Naomi snaps, halting him as he steps toward me. "I'll see you inside in a minute. After I've had a second to talk with him. *Alone*?"

Vaughn grinds his jaw, but nods as he looks at Naomi. "Five minutes. Or I'm coming back out here and teaching your boyfriend how to shut his fucking mouth."

"Dance like no one is watching, motherfucker," I mutter as he shoulders past me and opens the door to the theater.

After he leaves, Naomi spins to face me, eyes blazing.

“What the *hell* was that?”

My pulse is still racing. I want to hit something. Not him. *Obviously* not her. Just…something, to send this rage somewhere other than the center of my chest.

“We have an arrangement,” I growl. “You broke it.”

She throws her hands up. “I have to *work,* Nico. This is my *job.* Not some little hobby to pass the time!”

“We meet at eight every morning. That was the deal.”

“I’m not a robot!” she fires back. “Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to wake up early, go to your office, do…” She blushes. “Do…*that*—”

“Use your words.”

She looks sideways at me. “Your *bidding*,” she finally mutters. “And then schlep all the way back to the theater, where I’ll get my ass handed to me a dozen times by my sadistic artistic director, after which, I’ll stay late and put in some extra work on my own before limping home, crashing, and doing it all over again.”

“If this is you trying to get out of our arrangement, it’s not working.”

She exhales in exasperation. “And now you get to decide who I talk to as well?”

“You don’t talk to other men,” I growl, stepping in close. “It’s very simple.”

Her eyes spark. “Newsflash: I *do.* Frequently. You don’t get to make those kinds of demands. It’s not like—”

“I own you?” I smile smugly. “Actually, Naomi, *I do.*”

She rolls her eyes.

I'm torn. On the one hand, I *do* sort of like this new, empowered, sassy Naomi.

Sassy Naomi gets my dick *very* hard, and it make me want to spank that sass right out of her—ideally, with my cock balls-deep in her ass, and perhaps my cum dripping down her cheeks.

But on the other hand… She needs a reminder of who's in charge here.

"You *don't* fucking *own*—"

Her breath catches and her eyes go wide as my hand suddenly wraps possessively around her throat—not choking her, not hurting her, just squeezing tightly enough to send a message.

The mad staccato of her pulse against my fingers and the way she can barely contain the whimper in her throat are a pretty good indication that she received said message.

…Received, processed, and is currently trying to hide the fact that it is almost certainly making her panties wet.

She swallows heavily against my hand before she slips away from me, as if she needs the distance between us. "Vaughn is like a *brother* to me. He's been occasionally changing with the girls for years."

"That's not fucking happening anymore," I growl.

"Oh my *God*, you're jealous."

I say nothing.

She smirks. "Also—Vaughn is *bi*."

“And still a man with eyes,” I growl. “He could be a monk sworn to celibacy and I’d still throw him through a wall if I caught him seeing you naked again.”

She rolls her eyes.

“You don’t get to decide that.”

I smile wolfishly.

“Spoiler: I can do whatever the fuck I want when it comes to you.”

Naomi’s eyes flash with something I haven’t seen in her before. Not shame. Not fear.

Anger.

“Our arrangement,” she bites out, “is *not* a 24/7 thing.”

“Guess what,” I say, stepping even closer, letting the heaviness of the next words hang in the air between us. “It is now.”

She blinks, her brow furrowing. “Excuse me?”

“You’re right. It’s a waste of your time to have to wake up early after a full day dancing to come all the way to my office.”

She looks at me warily, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Smart girl.

“So, we’ll simplify things. You’ll live at my place with me. You’ll be available to me anytime and all the time.”

She stares at me, mouth slightly open.

“That’s…not happening.”

“It wasn’t a suggestion.”

The color drains from her face. “My father’s people would never allow that. Me moving in with you is a public relations *nightmare*.”

“Ask me if I give a single solitary *fuck* about your father’s focus groups.”

She shudders, her eyes widening as the reality hits her that I’m not in any way, shape or form joking. “Nico… *No*,” she blurts. “That’s not happening. It’s insane. *You’re* insane.”

I don’t flinch.

“You’re moving in with me, effective immediately.”

She lets out a slow, drawn-out breath. “That really isn’t happening.”

I step forward, closing what little distance is left between us.

“May I remind you,” I murmur, “what happens when you say *no* to me.”

She goes still—not stiff, not angry.

Just…still.

Like a switch flipped.

Like something inside her shut off.

Her eyes don’t flash or narrow or flare. They just go cold and hollow, like she’s retreated somewhere I can’t follow.

And I hate it, more than I thought I would.

“Fine.”

She says it quietly. Flatly.

Not broken.

Just…*gone.*

Fuck.

Fighting, sassy Naomi was fun. This Naomi that just…*quits*, goes cold, and takes it, is not.

“Fine,” she repeats dully. “Whatever you want. I have to go to work now.”

She turns before I can say anything else. Walks toward the theater door. Opens it, and slips inside. Then I’m alone in the alley.

Alone with fire still boiling in my blood.

I got what I wanted.

She agreed. She’s moving in. She’s mine.

So why the *fuck* does it feel like I just lost?

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NAOMI

WE MOVED a bunch of times when I was younger. Every time Dad climbed another rung on the political ladder, we'd "upgrade": a duplex in a working-class neighborhood became a split-level ranch in a great school district, then an even bigger house with a pool near a country club.

Then Mom died, and any pretense of keeping things normal and even-keeled for two or three years at a time went out the window. I moved *five more times* between the ages of nine and sixteen. Finally, Dad settled on the ludicrously enormous, gilded mansion in the suburbs of DC, and I moved into the residence at the school attached to the Washington Ballet Company, near the National Mall.

We never lived together after that. He had politics, I had dance. Since moving to New York four years ago, I've been in the same cruddy apartment, and I really thought I was done moving, at least for the next five to ten years. But you know what they say about the best laid plans…

My mouth is a tight line as the elevator doors glide open. Instantly, even *I* have a hard time keeping my expression blank when I see Nico's SoHo loft.

Ho. Lee. CRAP.

I half-expected some neon-accented, motorcycle-in-the-living-room, ultra masculine bachelor pad. Rock band stage, hot tub, maybe a stripper pole, panties from various “conquests” nailed to the wall.

But nope. Nico’s place is *stunning*.

It’s also enormous: a soaring, double-height space with a balcony walkway running around the perimeter, with doors leading who knows where.

I step out with my one bag of clothes slung over my shoulder and stare in awe at my surroundings, my spine locked tight.

I mean, *yeah*, as my dad climbed the political ranks, we lived in some seriously nice places. This, however? Next freaking level.

That said, for all its grandeur, luxury, and size, Nico’s penthouse is…cold.

Not in temperature, but in energy. It’s all sharp edges and clean lines. Steel and black marble. Perfect leather furniture I’ll bet no one ever relaxes on. Floor-to-ceiling windows with the city spread out beneath like a threat instead of a view.

There’s no warmth. No personal touches. Not one single piece of clutter.

Just sheer dominance, embodied in architecture.

“This way.” Nico directs me up a sweeping modern staircase to the second floor, then down a long hallway lined with recessed lights that glow like fire trapped under glass.

I follow. My heartbeat stays surprisingly steady. I tell myself that’s good. It means I’m still in control.

Such a lie.

He stops outside a door, then pushes it open.

Woah.

The bedroom is massive, done in the same minimalist aesthetic as the rest of the house. A king-size bed dressed in deep gray linens. Black walls with silver accents. A closet with its doors standing open, revealing empty hangers and perfectly aligned drawers. A leather bench at the foot of the bed.

It's beautiful.

It's also terrifying.

"This is your room," he says.

I glance around the space, which is very clearly a primary suite, not a guest room.

"You mean *your* room," I reply.

He turns to me slowly, lips curving with that same feral, dangerous amusement that always makes my stomach clench.

"*Our* room."

My core tightens.

"I…*what?* I'm not staying in the same room as you."

"Well, we can agree to disagree, but you are."

"Nico—"

"The purpose of bringing you here, Naomi," he murmurs quietly, "is *access*."

I swallow, my face heating as his eyes sweep over me.

“You were right: staying at your place and wasting time traveling to my office—time that could better be spent on your knees or bent over the nearest stationary object for me—makes no sense. Ergo, I moved you here.”

I simmer as I shift on my heels. “Yeah, but—”

“And while you’re here—seven months, was it, that we decided on?”

I shoot him a cold look. “*Six*.”

Nico smiles darkly. “Well, for those *six* months, you’ll sleep right here.”

“Why,” I say.

He shrugs. “Because if I wake up in the middle of the night and decide I want those pretty lips wrapped around my cock, or if I’m in the mood to fuck you into the mattress, it would be annoying…and, again, a waste of time…to have to go find you.” He shrugs as I stare at him in shock. “This way, you’re just…available.”

“And they say romance is dead,” I mutter dryly.

“Oh, no one’s promising you romance, Naomi,” he says, a glint in his eye. “But I *am* promising that you’ll be my pretty little fuck toy for the next six months.”

My pulse *blares* in my ears as heat spreads through my body.

He watches me as I walk to the bed, drop my bag beside it, and stare at the linens like they might bite.

“You’ll still go to the theater,” he says. “I won’t keep you from that.”

How generous.

“But when you’re not at work, you’ll be here.”

I nod once. My throat feels too dry to speak.

“You’ll wear what I give you,” he continues.

“And what might that be?” I ask dryly.

“Lingerie, sometimes. Or nothing, depending on my mood.”

I bristle, but keep my expression neutral. At least, I think I do.

He carries on, voice calm, almost clinical.

“You’ll sleep in my bed. Every night.”

I let that sink in, feeling it shivering over my skin as silence descends upon us.

“I did get you a welcome gift.”

I chew on my bottom lip as Nico goes to one of the recessed shelves, pulls out a drawer, and retrieves a matte black box tied with a white silk ribbon.

It’s not at all lost on me that this is the same type of white silk ribbon that he tied my wrists with that day in his office.

I look at it doubtfully as he hands it to me.

“It’s not a bomb, Naomi.”

I swallow as I sit on the edge of the bed, set the box on my lap, and untie the ribbon. I pull the lid off, then frown, trying to make sense of the two things inside.

When it hits me, I feel my eyes glaze over as my jaw drops and my face throbs.

Holy. Shit.

For half a second, I thought the first thing I was looking at was a necklace—a somewhat thicker, chunkier necklace than I might normally wear, but still a necklace.

No. It's not a necklace at all.

…It's a *collar*.

My pulse skyrockets, and my mouth goes dry.

An actual, literal *collar*. A polished silver, gleaming loop with a catch on the back and a delicate, almost-hidden hinge across it.

Then my eyes slide to the second thing in the box, and my face turns to pure fire.

That would be a butt plug.

It's the same polished silver as the collar, and, to be honest, *gorgeous*. It's not that big, and it tapers to a thin part in the middle, then flares out to a base with…

I stiffen.

…Are those *actual* diamonds?

"I'll take your silence as stunned excitement," Nico says drily. "In addition to the rules about what you wear and where you sleep, whenever you enter this apartment—at *any* time—you'll wear both of these."

Something dark and needy claws up my spine, sending a sparking sensation through my core that I desperately try and stamp out.

"Any questions?" he growls quietly.

"Yeah—what happens if I break a rule?"

Nico smirks. “You’ll find out.”

I drag my eyes from the box on my lap and look up at him with trepidation. “So that’s it, then? I’m just your little captive, bound up and obedient?”

I gasp when he reaches down and cups my jaw, lifting my chin as his eyes lock with mine.

“Don’t think of it like that,” he grins. “Think of it as choreography.”

I shake my head, biting back a laugh that’s more bitter than amused. “You’re a sadist.”

He lifts a shoulder. “Not particularly. But I *will* be in control of you. Now, if you’re done pouting…” He smirks. “Time for you to try on your new presents.”

I shoot him a look. “I’m not *pouting*.”

“You are.”

“Not at all. I’m just figuring out which window I can jump out of.”

He leans in, his voice dropping to a purr. “They’re all bulletproof, ballerina.”

* * *

AFTER DINNER—WHICH arrives via some exclusive Michelin-level delivery service I’ve never even heard of—Nico tells me it’s time for bed.

Not “you should get some rest”.

Not “if you’re tired”.

Just: “*Time for bed.*”

Confusingly, I don’t *hate* the command or the control in that line.

I follow him down the hallway, my bare feet quiet on the polished floors. I don’t know why I obey. Maybe because defiance feels exhausting tonight. Maybe because pretending I have a choice takes too much energy.

The metal of the collar warms against my throat.

I did end up putting my foot down about the plug—though Nico calmly explained that tomorrow, when I *did* wear it, it would come with a spanking to make up for tonight—but the collar seemed easy enough.

Simple, no big deal. Just like a choker.

But it feels like a lot more than “no big deal” now as I step into this man’s bedroom wearing it.

The lights are turned to a dim, warm glow as we walk in, the room smelling like *him*: masculine, clean, with hints of smoke and leather.

Nico goes to one of the bedside tables and opens the drawer. When he turns around, I freeze when I see the length of white silk ribbon in his hand.

He looks at me, calm. “Hands.”

I shake my head once.

His expression doesn’t change. He doesn’t raise his voice. Doesn’t step closer.

Just waits.

And that’s worse.

Nico doesn’t need to demand. He just…exists. Like gravity. You can fight it for a while, but eventually you’ll succumb.

“Can I go to bed if I do this?”

“Another way might be that you *can’t* go to bed unless you *do*.”

Dick.

I move forward. Slowly. Hands extended.

He binds my wrists in front of me, then gently tugs me toward the bed.

I expect him to throw me down and fuck me. To finally just get it over with.

This is how I lose my virginity, I think to myself, something dark curling inside me.

But he doesn’t.

He pushes me back onto the mattress and eases me against the pillows, like I’m something fragile.

I watch, my eyes widening and my pulse skipping as Nico peels his t-shirt off his hard, chiseled body. I flush, sliding my gaze greedily over him.

It occurs to me that I’ve never actually seen him this unclothed before. And holy fuck, the man is *shredded*. Pure, lean muscle from head to toe, with more tattoos covering his skin than I’d ever imagined. My eyes slide from the ink swirling on his neck down to the huge bird—a crow, or a raven—emblazoned on his chest.

I shiver when he takes my bound wrists and lifts them over my head. My pulse thuds, my throat working under the collar as he slips another length of silk ribbon—this one black—from behind the headboard and loops it around the ribbon binding my wrists. He yanks it tight, pulling my arms above my head, and my body begins to tremble.

My nipples tighten under the button-up top of the pajama set he graciously permitted me to put on.

…And heat *pools* between my thighs.

He's just in boxers, the front of them tented obscenely from his erection as he moves over me, straddling my midsection. I shiver, feeling the heavy pulse of his thick cock against my stomach through the fabric.

Nico reaches for the first button of my pajama top and deftly pops it.

"Are…" I tremble as he plucks open another one. "Are you going to fuck me?"

He slowly shakes his head.

"Again with that question. No, Naomi, I'm not going to fuck you."

He undoes another button, letting the top begin to fall open across my breasts.

"I'm going to *consume you*," he growls. "I'm going to fucking *own* you, inside and out." I whimper when he yanks the final button free, exposing my breasts and tight, rosy nipples. He reaches down and I gasp sharply when he takes one tender peak between his thumb and forefinger and pinches as he rolls it.

Oh fuuuck.

"When I fuck you, ballerina," he growls, "and I *am* going to fuck you, I'm going to *ruin you* for any other man."

He pinches my nipple again, switches to the other, then goes back to the first, alternating between the two until I'm writhing shamefully under him, my thighs squirming together. My skin is electrified where I can feel his fat, swollen, pierced cock throbbing against my stomach through his boxers.

Nico slides down, my stomach caving as I feel the metal of his piercing slide over me. His fingers slip into the waistband of my pajama bottoms and my panties, and he starts to peel them all the way down.

Exposing me.

Revealing everything to his dark, hungry gaze.

When he's got me completely undressed except for the unbuttoned pajama top caught on my arms, he reaches over and pulls open the bedside table drawer.

The butt plug glints in the low light as he slides it out, and my eyes bulge.

"*Nico*—"

"Rules are rules, Naomi," he growls quietly, his eyes gleaming wickedly. "Now: are you going to get this wet with your slutty little mouth, or am I going to have to make your pussy drip so much that your ass opens right up for me?"

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NICO

ANIMALISTIC SAVAGERY EXPLODES through me like black fire as I look down at her, sprawled naked on my bed with her wrists bound so beautifully to the headboard. Something sweet and yet so fucking eager blazes in her eyes.

Pure temptation, a dare.

Ruin me.

Wreck me.

Fuck me raw.

The flush on her cheeks and the glistening moisture on her lips. The way her thighs are parted, the sheets tangled around her ankles. The way her chest rises and falls like she's running from something.

Or rushing headlong *to* something.

All it makes me want to do is kiss the fuck out of her. So that's exactly what I do. Naomi whimpers, shuddering as my tongue slides over her lips, demanding her mouth. It's a clash of tongues and teeth, her moans filling my ears, her body jerking and writhing when I nip and bite at her lips.

Her eyes are half-hooded as I pull back. Her lips are swollen from my mouth, my teeth. I kiss my way down her throat and chest, dragging my tongue over the peak of one nipple and biting just hard enough to make her whimper.

She arches for me. Whines like she hates herself for it.

And I smile when I hear it, because that—*that*—is what I've been waiting for.

Not her obedience.

Her surrender.

I slide my hand between her thighs, slowly and possessively, stroking the slick heat that's already soaking her greedy little cunt. She gasps, and her hips twitch and buck. Her pussy is so fucking wet she's practically trembling.

"So nice and *eager*," I growl against her nipple before I bite down again, making her squeal. "I wonder what's gotten this pretty pussy so fucking messy for me. Is it the promise of me cramming every inch of my fat cock into this tight little hole? Is it knowing that I'm going to fuck my cum deep inside you, and then do it again, just to make sure it stays there?"

Naomi shudders, arching her body against the silk ribbons.

"Or are you just fucking *desperate* to feel this plug in your tight little back hole?"

She chokes on a moan as I slide back up her body, my teeth grazing her neck and pebbling her skin deliciously before I nip at her ear lobe.

"Is that it, Naomi? Are you just eager to be my good little anal slut? To get *fucked* like a bad girl, with both your tight little holes stuffed full at the

same time?”

“*Jesus*…” she chokes, gasping as I drag a finger up through her dripping wet lips.

“Nico works just fine,” I murmur against her neck. “But until you can pronounce my name correctly, there’s no use for your mouth, now is there?”

I drag the little plug up over her breasts, teasing a nipple with it before I trace higher, to her jaw.

“So let’s leave this *right here*…”

She mewls as I slip the plug between her lips, letting them close around the thinner middle part with the flared, diamond-encrusted base—*obviously* real fucking diamonds, don’t insult me—resting on them.

Then I start to slide down her body. My teeth leave a trail of destruction on her soft skin, biting, scraping and sucking until she’s a masterpiece of teeth marks and hickeys.

A deep moan rumbles from her chest when I shove her thighs apart and slide between them. She whimpers when I give her ass a spank and her inner thighs a few sharp smacks. Then she almost screams around the plug in her mouth when I drag my tongue through her lips.

I groan into her, tonguing her deeply as she begins to writhe and squirm against my mouth. But I shut that down with a firm hand on her hipbones, pinning them down firmly before I swirl my tongue around her throbbing clit.

Her entire body spasms, like I’ve just tasered her. I do it again, flexing my muscles as I keep her pinned to the bed, my tongue swirling and dancing around her swollen clit as her moans fill my ears.

I wrap my lips around it, sucking, nibbling and licking as her arousal coats my lips and chin.

Fuck. Me.

She tastes like fucking sin and sweetness and my new fucking favorite meal. I've never been one of those pathetic douchebags who "isn't into" giving head, or "does it because you should". I give head because a pleased pussy is an extra eager pussy. And an extra eager pussy means my dick is extra happy when he finally slides inside.

A win-win situation, if you will.

But this is different. It isn't just "warming things up" or whatever.

It's fan-fucking-*tastic*.

Yep, *totally* my new favorite meal. Definitely something I could keep doing for the next two hours or so, very happily.

It's all of it: the way she tastes. The way her velvety soft lips press against my mouth so eagerly. The way her hips rise and her strong dancer's thighs clamp around my ears. The way her moans drown out the rest of the world, until all I know is her pleasure, dripping all over my fucking tongue.

My lips wrap around her clit again. I start to suck hard, swirling my tongue around the swollen nub.

And Naomi. Goes. Fucking. Wild.

Suddenly, she's coming…*hard*.

She cries out, moaning and whimpering around the plug as her body spasms and arches off the bed. Her hips writhe against me, twisting and turning, her pussy quivering against my mouth as she comes all over my tongue.

I slowly pull away, and she gasps when I slide up and pull the plug from her mouth with a soft *plop* sound.

Instantly, my mouth replaces it, my lips crushing to hers in a brutalizing kiss.

“Taste how fucking messy your little pussy gets for me, baby,” I growl. “Taste what an eager little fuck toy you are.”

I move back down her body, shoving her limp, twitching legs wider as I settle between them again.

She moved like she was zapped when I ran my tongue over her pussy. Now she jerks like she’s just taken ten thousand volts when I do the same to her asshole.

“*Nico*!” she whimpers, moaning when I swirl my tongue round her tight little ring. Then I pull back and ease the slick, round tip of the plug against her little hole.

“Open up, Naomi,” I growl into her thigh. “Let me get inside your tight little ass.”

She’s wet as fuck from her pussy and my mouth, and it’s not a very big plug. Even so, it takes a bit of effort for me to work the tip in enough so her hot little hole can swallow the plug to the tapered part.

Naomi chokes sharply on a whimper, her breath catching, her eyes blazing.

“*Holy fuck*…” she breathes.

I move up her body, settling between her thighs with my throbbing, achingly hard cock pulsing on her flat belly. Her eyes go wide as saucers as she looks down to where it lies heavy on her stomach, twitching and leaking precum.

“*Nico*…” she blurts. “Nico, I—”

“Shh...” I growl, running my thumb over her lips before sinking it into her mouth. I roll my hips, letting the swollen head of my cock slip down over her clit. It nestles between her pussy lips, and her eyes go wide.

“*Nico*—”

“You’re so fucking tight and small, baby,” I murmur, rolling my hips slightly. “I’m going to have to work this cock in nice and slow to get it to fucking *fit*.”

“Yes… Go slow,” she chokes, breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling, her eyes tense. “Just… Go slow.”

Her trepidation is…unexpected. To this level, I mean. I start to push into her, and then I see her jaw clench tight.

Okay, I’m…*big*. Really fucking big. But I’m not a fucking baseball bat. And she’s *soaking* wet, with more of her arousal smeared over my head and leaking down my shaft.

So what the fuck is the problem?

“Naomi—”

“*I’m a virgin*.”

It rushes out of her all at once, like one word, not three. And it hits me like a slap.

Fucking *what*?

My brow knits as I pause, my aching, leaking cock pressed up against her opening.

“Say that again.”

“I-I’ve never…” Her voice breaks. “I’ve never done this before.”

I stare down at her—her flushed face, her bound wrists, her heaving chest—and for the first time since I tied her to this bed, I don’t know what the fuck to do.

Then I bark out a laugh.

“You expect me to believe that?”

Something darkens in her eyes.

“You made a fucking *porno*, Naomi,” I spit. “With two men.”

The second the words leave my lips—and possibly before that, when the thought first enters my head—it’s like I’ve been filled with pure venom.

Like I suddenly want to commit violence on a biblical level.

Naomi’s mouth twists.

“No,” she hisses icily. “I *didn’t*.”

Her voice is sharp and cutting.

“They didn’t—” She pauses, collects herself. “I’ve never had sex. Like, actual sex.”

I stare at her, jaw tight. “*C’mon*—”

Her eyes flash. “I’m *not lying*. Why are you pushing this? You’ve seen the fucking video.”

The words slam into me like a punch.

And then, I feel it. Confusion. Rage. All coiled around the same truth I’ve been ignoring.

“I don’t want to talk about the fucking video,” I bite out.

“Why—”

“Because I have *zero fucking interest* in watching you with someone else,” I snap viciously.

The silence that follows is heavy and thick.

I may have just crossed a line I can’t retreat back over.

Because the problem is, my reaction isn’t due to some pathetic reason like being turned off that she has a past. *I* have a past. Everyone has a past, and I’m not some fragile little fuck who can’t accept that.

No, my reaction is based on surging, throbbing, neon green, livid *jealousy.*

And that was never supposed to happen. That’s not what this *thing* between us was meant to be.

This wasn’t about feelings, or jealousy, or being territorial, or literally *anything* but using her, breaking her, and ruining her.

But I think we’ve managed to wander *way* off that trail. At least, I have.

And now I don’t have any fucking clue how to find my way back.

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NAOMI

MY SKIN IS COVERED in a sheen of sweat, making my leotard stick to the small of my back. My muscles scream as I push myself again and again and *again*.

I've lost track of how long I've been dancing. I do know the rest of the company left ages ago. But me and my wonderful imposter syndrome decided to punish ourselves by staying late, working alone on stage in the darkness of the theater, a single light shining down.

My quads burn, my chest is tight. I'm sweating through the bodice of the Odile costume I've donned, since it's got some feathers on one shoulder that I wanted to start getting used to.

I don't stop dancing. Stopping means thinking, and I can't do that right now.

I hold my pose at the end of the variation, chest rising and falling, then plié deeply to propel myself straight into another turn. I bobble the landing a bit.

Goddammit.

I try the transition again.

This isn't about perfecting technique. Or prepping for opening night.

It’s about chasing a feeling…or maybe trying to erase one.

My mind keeps returning to the night before.

With *him*.

The dark pleasure of his mouth and tongue. The way his hands felt on my body. The silk ribbon biting into my wrists. The filthy things he whispered like prayers.

Then I told him I was a virgin and it all stopped, like a record scratching.

And I can’t stop thinking about what that means.

Maybe the dark games we’d been playing lost their appeal to him the moment he discovered I'd never had sex before. Maybe he thought he’d have to “teach me” or something, and that was a turnoff.

Or maybe it was that fucking video being brought up again. Maybe he was disgusted by that. Maybe *I* disgust him.

Maybe I disgust myself.

I should be *grateful* that nothing further happened last night, right?

But try as I might—and I *have* been trying—I can’t escape the wildly inconvenient fact that when Nico touches me, it has a way of simply erasing everything else.

It takes away the rawness of what happened at that "photoshoot". It quiets the screaming in my head that still wakes me most nights.

There’s a certain comfort in the brutal, ultra-dominant way he touches me. A surrender in the submissiveness he brings out in me. It’s an addictive rush that he alone can give me. And for that reason, maybe I *am* disappointed that he didn’t keep going last night.

Until he’d taken all of me.

My mind drifts as I do a series of piqué turns from one corner of the stage to the other, spinning closer to the dark shadows of the theater wings, the black feathers on the shoulder of my costume fluttering.

I should just tell him what the video he’s lording over me really is. That it wasn’t some fucking *porn* shoot, but an assault.

That I was drugged. That I didn’t say yes. *Couldn’t* say yes.

In a way, it feels like I’m weighing one sort of darkness against a different kind.

If it *was* a porn, I’d feel shame about it. It actually being a video of my assault brings shame, too, but *that* shame is somehow worse. Heavier. Deeper. Sticky and raw and swallowing.

Let's face it: I was stupid for going there in the first place. For trusting a stranger. Maybe I was weak for not fighting harder.

So given the choice, I’m choosing the shame of him thinking I did a porn with two men over the reality. Somehow, that’s easier. Cleaner.

For me, being reckless and foolish is more forgivable than being *weak.*

I pull my mind back to the choreography. Pirouettes that should be effortless feel jerky. Transitions that should flow, don't. I push myself harder and faster, until my thighs seize up and the stage blurs.

And finally—my body gives out.

I collapse to the floor with a dull thud, my breath coming in sharp, shallow gasps.

“You’re very good.”

My body jolts and my head whips toward the house, my chest still heaving.

Nico is sitting in the front row.

Not moving.

Not smiling.

Just *watching*.

I sit up too fast and scramble to my feet, my pulse jackhammering.

Nico still doesn’t move. He’s sitting dead center, elbows resting on the arms of the theater seat, his piercing blue eyes locked on me making me feel exposed.

Both wanted, and not.

After last night, I don’t know what I am to him anymore: a virgin? A slut? A *disappointment*?

“How long have you been there?” I manage to whisper.

“Long enough to know you don’t fucking leave my head, even though I want you to.”

My breath catches in my throat.

It’s not what I expected from the man who walked away last night without touching me. But with those words, he’s cracked open something raw inside me. Something that pulses low in my belly, like a bruise being touched.

I don’t know what to say. Don’t know what to *think*.

I’m not supposed to want this. I’m not supposed to crave his jealousy like it's affection. It’s sick and shameful and laced with something I don’t even have the language for.

But I do, and I feel it blaze to life like a match struck inside my chest.

“Come here.”

Nico’s voice is low, a dark drawl purring from the semi-darkness of the front row, sliding under my skin and coiling hot in my belly.

I hesitate.

He lifts a warning brow.

Slowly, I start to walk toward him. My legs feel shaky under me, but I move to the front of the stage, step by step, until I’m standing near the edge of it, looking down at him, my breath coming quickly.

I watch him watch me, the moment stretching out silently until the feeling of being poised before a drop almost overwhelms me.

Just as I'm opening my mouth to say something, he speaks.

“Take off your tights.”

He cocks his head, eyes dark.

“I don’t like to share what’s mine,” he continues. His voice is quiet, but it lands like a whip. “I don’t even like to *think* about sharing what’s mine.”

Oh God, he’s talking about the video again.

“Nico,” I begin, voice shaky. “I didn’t—”

He holds up a finger.

“I have no interest in talking about pasts,” he growls. “What I give a shit about is *right the fuck now.*”

He sinks back in his seat in the shadows and looks up at me like he’s deciding *exactly* how to devour me whole.

“So: take off your fucking tights. And then sit on the edge of that stage and spread your fucking legs for me like a good girl.”

For a full five seconds, I don’t even breathe. I stand there frozen, trying to force my throat to swallow the lump caught in it his eyes pin me in place.

“*Naomi*…” he growls quietly.

My hands move like they’re possessed by some external force, like I’m either completely *unaware* that I’m standing in a huge auditorium seriously considering doing this, or else I simply don’t care.

At this point in my life, caught up in hurricane Nico, it could well be the latter.

I feel like I’m watching myself from his point of view as my hands reach under my black tutu, undoing the snaps that keep the gusset closed. My fingers slip higher to the waistband of my tights. I push them down to my ankles, pausing briefly to remove my pointe shoes before sliding them off one foot, then the other.

I let them drop onto the stage next to me and just stand there, pulse thudding in my ears, my hands clenching and unclenching in at my sides.

He nods approvingly.

“Now sit,” he murmurs.

My face throbs and tingles as I walk to the lip of the stage and do as he says, legs hanging over the edge.

Nico’s eyes glint with something that both excites and terrifies me as he reaches up to stroke his fingers languidly over his chiseled jaw.

“Feet up, on the stage.”

It feels like someone else is controlling my body—like I'm a marionette—as I do as he says.

"Spread your legs wider, Naomi," he murmurs darkly.

A low whine hums through my ears, heat sparking through my veins. My breath catches and my eyes flare a little at his bluntness.

"I said *spread your legs wider*," Nico growls thickly. "And show me your pretty pussy. Show me *my* fucking pussy."

Heat floods my face. But I obey, my eyes locked on his as I slide back a couple of inches so I can spread my legs farther apart, the skirt of my tutu flipped up.

Nico calmly strokes his jaw, his ice-blue eyes piercing brightly out of the darkness, eviscerating me. Then his gaze languidly drops, and I can feel the heat of his gaze teasing over the throbbing heat building there.

My shameful arousal.

My eager desperation.

Nico looks right at me, unblinking, making my core spasm and my pulse and face burn even hotter.

"Now touch yourself. Play with that messy little pussy for me."

I hesitate. My thighs try to close.

"Naomi…"

His voice cuts through the space like a blade, and my eyes snap to his. His expression hasn't changed, but his voice has softened just enough to cut deeper.

“You’re doing so well,” he murmurs. “You’re being such a good girl for me. Show me how a good girl rubs her greedy little cunt.”

My breath catches violently. That phrase—*good girl*—slices through my resistance like it’s nothing but gossamer.

I bring my fingers down, gasping quietly as they slide over my lips.

I stroke once, tentatively, barely grazing but feeling how *embarrassingly* wet I am.

“More,” he commands gently. ““You’re dripping, baby. Such a good girl, making such a mess.”

The sensation that rolls through me is hot and needy, achy and consuming. My face crumples along with my inhibitions, my fingers rubbing my clit as I cry out.

“*That’s* it, baby,” he growls. “Slow circles. Get that pretty pussy nice and ready for me. Show me what a greedy little slut you can be.”

Whatever trepidations I have left shatter around me as the sensations throb through my core. I spread my legs a little wider, feeling the ache twist deliciously low in my belly. My other hand goes behind me to brace on the stage and I lean back slightly, shaking and biting my lip as I work my fingers over my pussy.

My eyes start to fall shut as the pleasure coils within me. But I can *feel* his gaze on me, like I’m his masterpiece, and he’s letting me paint the first layer before he takes over and destroys it.

“You’re being such a fucking good girl, Naomi,” he murmurs. “Rubbing that pretty pussy so well for me.”

The praise is like fuel thrown on a fire.

“You’re glowing, baby. Fuck, you look so beautiful trying not to scream for me.”

I moan a little louder, fingers circling over my clit as the throb in my core surges and clenches and demands.

“Look at you,” he purrs. “So fucking obedient. You touch yourself better when I’m watching, don’t you?”

I choke on a moan, my hips twitching upward.

“I asked you a question, Naomi.”

A low groan wrenches from my throat. I nod eagerly: I can’t speak. My fingers keep working, and I can feel the tension building—hot, thick, unbearable.

“I bet that needy little clit is throbbing for me.”

It is.

“Don’t slow down,” he says. “Keep going until I say you can stop.”

My arm behind me is braced tight, keeping me from falling back. My other hand is a blur, shamelessly fingering myself as I grind my palm against my clit. I’m moaning louder now, helpless and unrestrained.

And still he doesn’t move. Just watches, like a man studying a painting being created in real time.

My head lolls back. My eyes squeeze shut.

“Don’t look away,” he growls sharply.

I force my eyes open. Force myself to look right at him, letting his unflinching, unmerciful gaze eradicate whatever shame I have left.

“Good girl,” he praises. “You're going to look at me when you fall apart.”

I’m so close. Close enough that I can feel the edges of the world beginning to fray. I can't help it, my eyes hood, head dropping back as my chest tightens…

And then suddenly, I feel it: hot breath near my pussy.

My whole body jerks. My eyes fly open again, and I look down to see Nico standing in front of me, no longer in his seat. He’s stepped right up to the edge of the stage between my legs. His hands grip my thighs as his eyes lock on mine, his jaw clenched tight.

“*My fucking turn*.”

His tongue is heat and destruction.

He buries it between my legs, licking my pussy with slow, punishing strokes—deliberate, all-consuming, tasting my surrender and shame.

I cry out, half gasping, half moaning, my thighs trembling around his head as he drags his mouth over me again and again.

He grabs the backs of my thighs, shoving my legs up and apart as I tumble back. I writhe, stuffing the heel of my hand into my mouth as Nico devours my dripping pussy. He growls into me savagely, forcing his tongue into me like he's fucking me with it.

My toes curl as he drags his tongue up to my clit, swirling and darting around the throbbing nub as I keep screaming into my hand. His tongue drags back down through my lips and then keeps going. My face crumples, and I *melt* as his wicked tongue swirls lightly around my asshole.

“*Nico*…” I mewl, a whimpering, subby mess on the stage as he fucks both my holes with his tongue. His palm cracks sharply against my ass, sending

electric heat throbbing through my core.

My back arches as he pulls my clit between his lips, his tongue mercilessly swirling around it as my entire world begins to shatter.

“That's it,” he growls against me. “Give it to me, baby. Let me have it. Let me have your fucking come all over my tongue.”

My breath catches violently as my eyes fly wide open.

“Come for me like a good little slut, *now*.”

I do.

Hard.

The orgasm rips through me so fast I barely register the beginning before I’m arching off the stage, clawing at it, my back bowed as I fall apart with his name on my lips.

“*Nico*—!”

He groans, licking me through it like he wants to devour the sound of my pleasure. When I try to pull away from the overstimulation, he pins my thighs open and keeps going.

“Stay still,” he growls. “I’m not fucking done with this pussy.”

By the time he finally pulls away, my body is limp. Breathless. Completely ruined.

I blink up at the single light overhead, dazed.

And then I hear it.

The sound of fabric and a belt buckle hitting the floor.

Nico climbs onto stage, naked, his huge, rock-hard cock swinging heavily between his muscled thighs, a panther who's cornered his prey.

I whimper, caught between need and erotic fear as he moves over me like a predator, pushing me against the stage as he shoves my thighs apart and crawls between them.

I glance down at him, shivering as my core tightens.

His cock is…*massive.*

Thick. Veined. Swollen and leaking precum as it bobs heavily against his abs. And that gleaming metal stud at the tip glinting wickedly…

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

Which is fine, because in that instant he leans down, grabs a fist of my hair at the back, and crushes his mouth to mine in a brutalizing, branding kiss.

I whimper into his mouth, feeling my breath hitch as his swollen cock parts my lips and sinks against my opening.

"This pretty pussy's been waiting just for me, hasn't it."

I shiver as he sinks the head in just a touch, letting me feel the first stretch.

"*No one* else gets this," he murmurs darkly. "Ever. Understand?"

I moan softly, thighs shaking, my pulse all over the place, my body a dripping, shaking, eager mess as he teases my clit with his enormous cock.

Heat pulses deep inside me as he grabs my wrists and shoves them over my head, pinning them with his hands as his fat head twitches against my pussy.

"Eyes on me, baby. Look right at me when I take what's mine."

Then he pushes in.

The stretch is instant, sharp. My breath punches from my lungs as he fills me inch by slow, huge inch.

“You’re doing so good,” he mutters. “So fucking *tight*. So fucking perfect around my dick. You were made for my cock, Naomi.”

I cry out, hips jerking, unsure whether I want more or less or *everything.*

“Almost…” he murmurs, voice strained.

My eyes roll back as a tearing sensation dissolves into something hot and melty.

“Fucking…”

Warmth floods my core as pure, unfiltered pleasure suddenly fills my veins.

“*There*.”

Then he’s fully inside, buried to the hilt, every fat, hot, hard inch of him claiming every single piece of me.

His mouth is near my ear, his voice a low, reverent growl as he grinds deep.

“You feel that, baby?” he breathes. “That’s your old life ending.”

Then he starts to move.

I choke on a moan as he slides out of me, only to shove right back in.

Deeply. Punishingly. *Unmercifully*.

Forcing my body to admit exactly how much I crave the submission. The stretch. The brutal rhythm of his hips as he starts to pick up speed.

I dig my nails into his back. I bite his shoulder. I scream into his mouth as he swallows the sound with a growl.

And I realize—I've never wanted anything so badly.

Just him.

And being *taken*.

There's no first-time gentleness. He's not "making love" to me.

He's *claiming me*.

Maybe I've never really been Odette at all. Maybe I've always just been waiting for the moment my wings turn black, and I embrace Odile.

My body jolts as I cry out, hands scrambling for purchase on the stage, my back arching against the worn wood. He growls viciously as he starts to ram into me harder, pulling almost all the way out before driving his thick cock back in again, over and over.

"*Fuck*," he hisses through clenched teeth against my throat as I whine for more. "*So fucking tight*."

The pain is real.

But not enough to make me want him to stop.

If anything, it makes me want *more*.

Because it doesn't *remain* as pain. It changes. Sharpens. Becomes heat and pressure. Becomes something only he can pull from me.

This doesn't feel like innocence lost.

It feels like innocence being torn from my body. Ripped apart, and devoured, and rewritten as something darker.

Odette dies in the end.

I don’t want to die.

I want to rise up as Odile, and watch the world burn as I dance barefoot through the fire.

Nico fucks me like he’s waited a lifetime to be inside me, and now he’s making up for every second he wasn't.

There’s no tenderness. Nothing gentle.

Just his teeth and hands, and filthy praise grunted between breaths.

“Good fucking girl,” Nico growls, his grooved, muscles hips coiling as he pounds his fat cock into me over and over, both of us drowning in the lewd wet sounds of my soaking pussy stretched tight around him. “Taking my dick like you were made for it.”

I moan—loud, unrestrained. My costume scratches against the skin of my back and waist. But I don’t care. I want the scratches. I want the pain.

He hooks one of my legs over his shoulder and drives in deeper.

I scream. He catches it in his mouth. Kisses me like he’s claiming the sound as his.

And it is.

Every cry, every moan, every screamed sob—I give them all to him.

My thighs start to tremble again. The orgasm builds fast, sharp as a blade dragged along my spine.

“You’re so close,” he snarls. “I can feel it.”

I nod, gasping. “*Nico*—”

My head lolls to the side, and I cry out as he grabs my throat and jaw in his hand, pulling me back to him.

“Don’t you fucking *dare* look away,” he growls, fucking into me. “You look me right in the fucking eye when you come all over my dick like a good girl. You’re clenched so tight around me, baby, like you’re trying to strangle my cock with your tight little pussy. You love my fat cock tearing you apart, don’t you? Scream for me, baby. Come all over my fucking dick for me. You’re my good girl, Naomi. And my good girl is going to come for me like a greedy little whore *right now*.”

The second the words leave his mouth, I *break*.

Truly. Utterly. Devastatingly.

The climax tears through me, violent and shattering. My whole body convulses beneath him, rippling inner walls clenched around him like a vise.

He roars as he slams into me one last time, burying himself deep, spilling into me with a vicious growl that sounds more animal than man. His cock jerks and pulses, and I feel every twitch. Every thick blast of cum as it spurts into me.

His mouth crushes to mine, stealing my lips, my breath, my moans.

…Whatever last shred of sanity I have.

I can’t think. Can’t move. I just *exist*—wrecked and filled and floating.

I didn’t just lose my virginity tonight.

I shed the white swan.

I laid her to rest, and rose again as something hungrier and unholy.

I don’t know if I’ll ever be Odette again.

…Or if I even want to.

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NICO

I'VE NEVER BEEN the best sleeper. I mean, I *sleep*, obviously, but straight through the night? Not the norm. It's like I can't shut my brain off long enough. Which means there are times—like right fucking now—where I go from asleep to wide awake and start thinking about the most *random* shit in the world.

Although tonight it's not that random.

In the near total darkness of my bedroom, I turn to the side, a curious feeling washing over me as my eyes slide over her, lying beside me.

I've never done this before.

Not the sex. Or the domination.

I mean the *sleeping.*

I've never actually fallen asleep beside a woman. Ever. I've never let one get close enough to share the dark, quiet hours when my thoughts turn feral and the black thoughts bleed in.

But I've spent the last twenty-four hours in this bed with Naomi, and I haven't wanted to leave it once.

We've been here ever since I fucked her on stage last night, losing myself entirely in her. After that, I took her back here, and that is where we've stayed.

Fucking like *animals*.

She had today off, which is good, because I'm pretty sure she can't stand, let alone dance. I'm no better: "sore" is a fucking understatement. So are "chafed", "bruised", and "severely fucking dehydrated."

My body feels like it's been through *war*.

And Naomi?

I let my eyes slide over her skin in the dim light from the evening city gleaming behind the shades.

Jesus Christ.

She looks like she owed a Vegas gangster money and couldn't pay.

Purple covers her wrists, hips, and thighs. There are maul-marks on her breasts, and more bruises on her throat. Not to mention the ones on her ass shaped like my palms.

Fuck me. I grin savagely just thinking about it. She brings out something in me I've never felt before. Not to this level, I mean, not by a fucking mile.

It's an animalistic hunger.

An obsession.

She makes me insatiable. Consumed with mad need for her.

And it's like she herself craves all the unhinged madness that she creates in me. Feeds off it. Whatever I give, she pushes for more.

Whatever boundary I *think* I'm pushing, she tells me to push it farther.

I'm not sure if she's created a monster in me, or if it's the other way around.

She's asleep now—barely covered by the sheet, one thigh thrown over mine, staking her claim. Her lips are parted, lashes dark against her flushed cheeks. She looks ruined.

She looks *perfect*.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand. I reach for it without waking her, and my face tenses when I read the silent alert flashing across the screen.

MOTION DETECTED – UNIT 47A – 3RD FLOOR ENTRY.

Fuck.

Ever since Mario told me about the Obsidian Syndicate clashing with Leonard Kim for trying to break his contract with them, I've had a bad feeling building in my chest.

If they're after Leonard, Naomi's a target, too.

I mean, fuck, it's one of the reasons I made her move in with me in the first place.

So I had silent alarms set up at her old apartment—and now someone's there, looking for her.

And I'll be fucking dead before I let them find her.

* * *

I USE the back door to slip into Naomi's old building, then silently take the stairs two at a time. At the top floor, I move quietly down the hall,

unscrewing every bulb from its fixture, bathing the place in shadows until I get to her door.

It's locked, but that doesn't mean shit.

I use the key that I made, pulling my gun from my belt and listening intently as the door swings open. Darkness swallows me whole as I step inside. I move room to room like a wraith, gun at the ready, every nerve in my body wired tight.

Living room. Clear.

Kitchen. Clear.

Bedroom—

"Fourteen minutes from SoHo to Harlem," a voice purrs from the shadows. "That's a hundred and ten blocks."

I whip around and see Kir Nikolayev leaning against the edge of Naomi's vanity in the corner of the dark bedroom.

"That *has* to be some sort of record," he murmurs. "Even at this hour."

The enigmatic head of the Nikolayev Bratva—one of the most powerful Bratva families in the world, with a permanent seat at the Iron Table—steps out of the shadows and cocks a brow as his gaze drops to my gun.

"I'm not generally a fan of having a gun pointed at me. Especially when I'm just looking to have a conversation, Nico."

Kir's the type of leader who wields power like a surgeon holds a scalpel—with precise elegance. He doesn't throw his weight around or starts shit, isn't loud, and never walks around thumping his chest.

Sitting in the shadows waiting for a trap he’s set himself to be sprung, however, is completely on brand.

Strangely, he and Carmine don’t get along. *At all*.

Tall, lean, and muscular, Kir’s in his early forties—at least, I think so. Dark hair with a slight dusting of silver at the temples, ice-blue eyes. Tailored suit.

“In that case,” I mutter, tucking away my gun, “I would suggest *not* slinking around in the shadows after—purposefully, I’m assuming—setting off someone’s alarm system.” I smile. “If you're *not* a fan of having guns pointed at you, I mean.”

Kir smirks, nodding quietly before he turns and strolls casually to Naomi’s bedroom window. He peers out, glancing side to side before he points at a building across the alley.

“Fifteen feet away. High enough for a view without being seen. No surveillance or security. Good cover. Clean escape routes.” He’s smiling venomously as he turns back to me. “Can I assume if I were to swab the rooftop across from Ms. Kim’s bedroom window, I’d find samples of your DNA, Mr. Barone?”

Maybe.

Probably.

Fuck you, prick.

“What do you want, Kir,” I mutter, scowling.

He folds his arms over his chest as he leans against the wall behind him, legs crossed at the ankles.

“I told you: a conversation.”

“I have a phone.”

“The sort of conversation I’d like to have *cannot leave a trail*,” Kir says pointedly.

Oh, *really*.

I don’t necessarily trust Kir.

Nobody in the Black Court does.

Kir’s old-school. He believes in structure and hierarchy when it comes to underworld empires, and he’s not exactly silent about his thoughts on the Black Court and our…*unique* style of policing said underworld empires.

The Black Court offends his sense of order. In his mind, we’re just a bunch of vigilantes: rogue judges rewriting the rules to suit ourselves.

“I assumed the best way to get your attention without getting anyone *else’s* as well was through Naomi’s apartment. What with certain forces being at odds with her father, and *him* being virtually untouchable right now, she’d—”

“It’s two-fucking-thirty in the morning, Kir,” I growl. “Why don’t you get to the point before the sun comes up.”

He dips his chin.

“One of my warehouses was hit yesterday.”

Well… That’s interesting. Shocking, to be honest.

This whole city knows who Kir is, what he’s capable of, and the kind of power and influence he wields. *Nobody* would be stupid or suicidal enough to knock over one of his warehouses. And if someone actually had the kind

of strength to go toe to toe with him, they wouldn't waste an opening shot on something piddling like stealing from him.

I roll my eyes. "In that case, I'd suggest calling the police. Look, *you're* the one who called me here. If there's something you want to tell me, just do it already so I can go back to bed."

Kir's brow arches, an amused look on his face. "Ahh, I see the problem here."

"The fact that you weren't thoughtful enough to have a coffee waiting for me?"

His smile fades. "No, you thinking I called you here because I needed your help with something." He slowly shakes his head. "That's not it at all, Nico. This is *me* doing *you* a favor." He takes a slow breath. "The warehouse job was quiet, surgical, and precise. All inventory gone, surveillance tapes looped, entry logs deleted." His jaw grinds. "Not exactly the mark of a bunch of idiots, and anyone I know in the city who could pull off something like that is either an ally or the type to come at me much harder than merely picking my pocket."

I resist the urge to tell him I already connected these dots several minutes ago.

"I believe it was a targeted move," he says. "But not a robbery. A warning."

My brow furrows. "Why do I get the sense you already know who did it."

"Because I do." He levels a cold look at me. "Can I assume you're aware of an organization going by the name The Obsidian Syndicate?"

I keep my face neutral. "It might…ring a bell."

Kir smirks. “Yes, I’m sure it might,” he says drily. “I believe the hit on my warehouse was in retaliation for me watching them too closely. I’ve been monitoring their expansion into New York. It used to be that they were simply mercenaries; guns-for-hire, destabilizers…that sort of thing. But they’re shifting from service to sovereignty now. Territory, policy, politics. It’s no longer about working for clients, but about building their own empire.”

I exhale, rubbing a hand over the back of my neck. “This is all fascinating, Kir,” I sigh. “But again, I *do* own a phone. I'll give you some free advice: you’re one of the most powerful men in the city. Someone decides to step on your toes?” I shrug. “Cut off their fucking leg. Problem solved.”

Kir’s mouth curls slightly at the corners. “Thank you for that truly *masterful* lesson in tactics, Nico. But I’m not interested in destabilizing my entire empire over one warehouse and a bruised ego.” He frowns. “The Obsidian Syndicate doesn’t scare me. But going to war with them affects my distribution lines, my shipping ports, my contracts. It brings noise where I need quiet. *That* is why I’m here.”

I smirk. “Hate to say it, but this *really* sounds like you asking me for a favor.”

“Then you’re not paying attention,” he replies coldly. “Nico, you’re already at war with them whether you admit it or not. They bombed your father’s birthday party. They’re digging into your little…*club*.”

I bristle, forcing myself not to show emotion when he mentions the Black Court. But I see amusement in his eyes when it’s clear he’s touched a nerve.

“Yes, Nico, I know what you and your friends do in the shadows. Just as I know that the Obsidian Syndicate is more than a bit interested in who you all are, where you meet, and how you might be either exploited or

destroyed," he growls. "I also know that of all your animal mask friends, *you* are the only one trying to sound the alarm." He shrugs. "I applaud your intuition."

"I don't need your compliments," I mutter.

"No, but you might need this," he says, reaching into his jacket. "It's something you can use. Information that isn't readily available."

He pulls out a folded piece of paper, and flicks it onto the corner of Naomi's bed. When I pluck it up, I frown at the name written on it in clear, neat penmanship: *Cyprus Logistics, LLC*.

"That," Kir growls, "is a shell company that launders money and processes massive amounts of narcotics domestically for US distribution." His eyes lock with mine. "It's operated by the Obsidian Syndicate, and accounts for a third of their profits these days."

I study the slip of paper before I glance back at him, frowning.

"As I said," Kir continues. "Your family is already in conflict with the Obsidian Syndicate, due to the unfortunate events at Vito's birthday party. If I hit them back, it'll be an escalation of war, and every criminal element in this city will view it as such. If *you* retaliate, it's personal. They hurt your family; you're hurting them back. That's the sort of mafia justice every player in the city would understand, sympathize with, and accept."

I frown. "Yeah, this still *really* sounds like you're asking me to—"

"I'm not asking you to do a *fucking thing*, Nico," Kir mutters. "Hit them back, send them flowers, I truly don't care. The warehouse I lost means nothing to me. It's sand kicked on my shoe."

"And you seriously think I'm going to believe that you're just giving me this information out of…what, some need to be a good Samaritan—"

Fucking fuck. It suddenly hits me.

“You don't want me to do your dirty work for you. You want me to *owe you*.”

His smile glints in the darkness. “Nothing in this world is free, Nico.”

“And if I refuse?”

He shrugs. “Then you refuse. Take the information and do something with it, or don’t. Use it and decide you *don’t* owe me. I don’t care, and I’m not going to bother hounding you for it. But…”

I frown. “But we’ll both *know* I owe you, whether you come to collect or not.”

Fucker's good, I’ll give him that.

“Why me,” I grunt. “Why not go to Carmine with this.”

“I don’t like your brother,” he says bluntly. “I think he’s a sociopath with a permanent ax to grind.” He shrugs. “You, on the other hand, are more… methodical. *Unencumbered* by narcissistic traits.”

“You make it sound like Carmy’s a psychopath.”

“You and I both know that’s *exactly* what your brother is, Nico,” he says flatly.

Okay, fair.

I stare at the slip of paper for a beat longer.

“If I use this,” I murmur, holding it between my fingers. “It doesn’t make us allies.”

“Once again, Nico, your masterful insights are greatly appreciated,” he says drily.

I shrug. “Make all the jokes you like, dickhead. It *doesn’t*.”

“Nico, I could swallow your family whole,” Kir says calmly, his voice devoid of any threat or malice. “Believe me when I say I truly *do not care* if you and I become friends, or if our families are allies or not.”

“What I mean,” I snarl, “is that this doesn’t change anything when it comes to you digging into business you…shouldn’t be digging into.”

As in, the Black Court, and Kir’s not-so-subtle prodding into it.

“I’d be disappointed if it did,” he says with a smirk.

He nods at me, stepping past me to leave. Then he pauses in the doorway to Naomi’s bedroom, turning to glance around the room before letting his eyes settle on me again.

“I have no skin in the game when it comes to your personal relationships, Nico. Nor do I have any interest in the motivations for those relationships—if, say, you’re seeing someone because you care for her, or just want to stick a fork in her father’s eye.”

I bristle.

“That said, your current girlfriend, or victim, or whatever Ms. Kim is to you, also happens to be a *very* talented dancer at the ballet company that I fund. Not to mention, the star of a highly anticipated production of *Swan Lake* that said ballet company will be performing soon.”

“And?”

He eyes me. “And I would deem it a personal favor if you didn't *fuck that up*.”

I smirk. Kir dips his chin.

“Be seeing you…*Raven*.”

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NAOMI

I SLIP the burgundy dress over my head and smooth it over my hips before turning to look at myself in the mirrored dressing room wall.

It's shorter than I usually wear, even for going out, but still flowy and loose around my thighs, and sleeveless, with a deep neckline plunging into my cleavage. My hair's slightly curled, lips painted, wrists already perfumed.

For a second, my gaze in the mirror slips past my shoulder, through the doorway from the dressing room into the bedroom.

Specifically, to the bed.

My face heats as I suck my bottom lip between my teeth.

Replays of the events of the last thirty-six hours or so *spent* in that bed slam into me all at once. His mouth, his hands, his cock—*holy hell,* his cock. My name falling from his lips, being groaned possessively against my skin.

A delicious shiver slides down my spine. Then I shake the thought off, centering myself again and leaning closer to the mirror to touch up my eyeliner.

"What are you doing?"

I flinch, jolting when I see Nico's stepped into the dressing room too, his muscled frame dressed in black jeans and t-shirt filling the doorway.

What are you doing.

No *you look nice*. No *wow*. Not even a *where are you going*. Just an immediate flag of disapproval, like I'm a situation he didn't authorize.

"I'm going out," I say calmly, turning to face him.

His eyes flick over my hair. My makeup. My dress, my heels.

He still doesn't compliment me.

A hollow, stupid ache rises in my chest, and I instantly hate myself for it.

We're not a couple. He's not my boyfriend. I'm not sure *what* I am to him, actually. Leverage? His fucking plaything?

A hostage with Stockholm syndrome?

When he doesn't immediately respond, I clear my throat. "Some of the girls are going out dancing at Doomsday and invited me."

Nico's jaw ticks. "Some of the girls."

"Yeah."

"*Just* the girls?"

I roll my eyes. "Vaughn may or may not be there."

I can feel the air shift, and his face darkens.

"Oh *come on*," I sigh. "It's *Vaughn*. I already told you, he's like a fucking brother."

"One that you get changed with," Nico growls.

“It’s not something I go out of my way to have happen,” I snap. “But, yes, I’m sure at some point, I’ve changed in the same room as him. And, hello? He sleeps with men, so what the hell is the problem?”

“He doesn’t *just* sleep with men.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, that would be putting the ‘*bi*’ in *bi*sexual.”

“That would be putting *him* in the fucking *ground* if he ever sees you naked again,” Nico snaps.

I cock a brow. “That feels *super* problematic.”

“What’s *problematic*,” he growls, stepping closer, “is *anyone* seeing what belongs to me. I don’t care who he fucks. I care about him, or fucking *anyone*, seeing what’s *mine*.”

“It’s a professional environment!” I snap. “We are *friends* and coworkers! And yes—at times—that *job* does include getting changed—”

“I *don’t share* what’s fucking mine,” Nico spits, a dark glint in his eye as he steps toward me.

I shiver when he surges closer, backing me up into the mirror. His clean, masculine scent invades my senses, making my knees weak as he plants a hand on the glass beside me and leans down, his eyes boring into mine.

“In any case, it’s a moot point,” he mutters. “You’re not going anywhere tonight.”

I blink. “*Excuse me*?”

He just shrugs.

“What, because of *Vaughn*? Are you fucking serious?”

“Not because of him,” he mutters. “You’re just not.”

My eyes turn angry. “Is that an order?”

He doesn’t respond.

“So, I’m your prisoner now?” I press.

“It’s not safe, Naomi.”

“Why not?”

His jaw grinds. “It just isn't.”

“Not good enough.”

“Too fucking bad,” he snaps.

The tension echoes between us like a slammed door.

He exhales slowly and runs his hand down his face, like he’s trying to keep from exploding.

“There are parts of my world you don’t understand,” he finally mutters. “Tonight, I don’t have the patience to explain them.”

Without another word, he turns and walks back to the doorway, pausing to glance back at me.

“I have to deal with something,” he grunts. “You are not going out.”

Then he’s gone.

I hear him walk through the huge apartment, then the sound of the front door opening and closing behind him.

I stay right where I am, seething in the dressing room, trying to figure out what the fuck I am to him.

What I want to be. And *why I care*.

My fingers tighten at my sides. Then I turn back to the mirror, grab my clutch, and yank out my phone to order an Uber.

Because fuck him.

* * *

THE SECOND I step out of the car, the bass from inside Doomsday hits me like a punch to the chest.

The club, housed in what was once a factory in the Meatpacking District, has a reputation as a place that can get…pretty wild. It's also popular with the underworld royalty of New York, and it’s not uncommon to see young mafia and bratva heirs downing shots of vodka and dancing the night away here.

Honestly, this place—at least its reputation—used to scare me a little. But then a couple of months ago, we came here for Lyra’s impromptu bachelorette party, and Milena and I ended up having a *blast*.

And now it’s made its way into “the crew’s” rotation for nights out.

“The crew” would be the usual suspects of partners in crime: Lyra, Milena, Brooklyn, Evelina, Bianca, and sometimes, if he’s not off causing mayhem somewhere else, Vaughn.

Tonight, that list is a little pared down. Bianca's out of the hospital, but she’s still taking it easy at home. Lyra is being super lame and not coming out as often, choosing instead to stay home and do whatever it is she and Carmine do.

…Which, A, seems to keep her in amazing shape, and B, gives her *lots* of the same kind of bruises I’ve used half a case of concealer to cover tonight.

My phone pings with a message on my group chat just as I get to the door.

BROOKLYN

NAOMI!!! Where r u? We're all inside.

ME

Here! Just getting through security.

BROOKLYN

Hurryyyy! Evie's shitfaced.

I grin. That probably means Evelina has had all of half a cocktail. The girl's a complete lightweight.

EVELINA

Am not!! :P :P :P

MILENA

I'm revoking your Russian card. You're gonna ruin our hard-earned reputation.

LYRA

LOL. Have fun ladies!

BIANCA

Boooooooo. Bed rest sucks :(

EVELINA

Naaaoooommii!! Getttt in heeeeeeeeeere!!!!!!!!

I laugh as I show the bouncer my ID and step into the club.

Inside, the place is packed. Neon spills from the ceiling in tangled beams as bodies sway on the dance floor, the smell of liquor, perfume, and sweat thick in the air.

I find the girls in a roped-off VIP booth near the back. Brooklyn's lounging with a drink in hand, wearing a periwinkle-blue dress, blonde hair piled on top of her head, eyes sweeping the crowd like she's hunting someone.

Milena is perched beside her all in black, perfectly put together as always, legs crossed and eyes passing casual judgment on everyone who walks by.

And Evelina—

I grin.

I swear, the girl is sunshine in human form.

“YAY!” she squeals as I step into the lounge area, springing from her seat and bolting over to hug me.

She’s not in pink for once, instead wearing a champagne-colored slip dress that makes her look like she floated in on a soft breeze from a fairy princess castle somewhere in the clouds.

Brooklyn whistles when she turns to see me. “Well, fuck. Look at you.”

“*Damn*, lady,” Milena adds, brows arching. “You look *hot*!”

I groan, rolling my eyes as I plop down next to them. Evelina sits down beside me and reaches for a flute of champagne, which Milena deftly pushes out of her reach.

“Hey!” Evelina pouts. “What the hell?”

“You’ll thank me tomorrow,” Milena smirks. “*Somebody* needs to pace you.”

Eveline sticks her tongue out and makes a face before she turns back to me. “Okay, seriously, you look incredible. That *dress*…” She clucks her tongue against her cheeks. “Fabulous. I love it all.”

Brooklyn eyes me, a faint grin on her lips as her gaze slides over my collarbone and neck. I squirm a little, suddenly hoping to *God* I used

enough concealer to hide the evidence of my newly minted non-virgin status at Nico's hands.

And tongue.

And cock.

Milena smiles curiously as she sips her cocktail and runs her eyes over me. "Hang on. You're glowing."

I stiffen. "Am not."

"You…kind of are."

I shrug, trying not to smile too hard or make a big deal. "I've just been… busy."

"Right," Brooklyn says slowly. "*Busy.*"

"Oh, I was totally going to ask," Evie blurts. "How's it been at your place, with that crazy accident up there?"

I blink. "What?"

"That five-car pileup that's been all over the news," Milena says, sipping her drink. "It was like a block from your place."

I force a nod. "Oh. Right. I think I…saw some of that."

I didn't. Because I've been at Nico's place.

In his bed.

Writhing and losing all sense of reality as his pliant little *fuck* toy.

They stare at me, and I swallow the heat on my face awkwardly as I lift my glass. "Anyway! What are we drinking to—"

“That’s a *great* dress,” Brooklyn remarks.

My brow furrows at the weird tone in her voice.

“Umm…thanks,” I say, trying to suss out why she’s looking at me so strangely. “I really love that blue on—”

“The burgundy goes well with those fucking *sex marks* all over you,” she cackles.

Well, there goes *that* grand hope.

Instantly, she, Milena, and Evie are all in my face.

“Oh. My. *LORD*,” Milena gushes. “She’s right! Girl, you’ve got bruises *all over*.”

My face heats instantly. “I do *not* have—”

“Oh, come on!” she laughs. “Your neck, your arms…” I yelp as she yanks my dress up an inch, showcase more purple marks on my thighs.

“Like *you guys* don’t get banged up at rehearsal?”

Brooklyn snorts. “Banged up? Yeah. Walking around all bow-legged like I got my insides rearranged? *Not so much*.”

She and Milena crack up as I curl in on myself in a ball of pure mortification.

“*So*?” Milena beams at me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

“So…what?”

“Details!” she giggles. “What? How? When? Where? Most importantly—”

“*Who*?!” Brooklyn finishes for her, loudly.

“None of your business!” I blurt.

Milena grins from ear to ear. “Which part?

“Any and all of it,” I groan.

“Here—I think you need this more than me,” Evelina says, passing me the flute of champagne she’s somehow managed to steal back from Milena. Her brows furrow in concern as her eyes sweep over me. Then she looks at our friends. “Guys, stop it. This isn’t funny.”

Brooklyn smirks. “No, no, false. This is *very* funny. And *very* intriguing.”

Evelina’s brow worries. “*No*, I mean…” She glances furtively at me, then looks back at the other two. “Like, abuse isn’t a joke.”

I frown. “Hold on, what?”

Eveline shifts a worried look to my thigh, pointing to the bruise from Nico’s thumb visible as my dress rides up a little. “Naomi, is someone hurting you?”

Oh. My. God.

For a second, there’s stunned silence. Then Brooklyn *loses it*, snorting a laugh and cackling as she falls backward across the booth seat.

“Oh, sweet, sweet Evie,” Milena sighs, a sympathetic grin on her face as she turns and lays a hand on Evelina’s shoulder. “*Honey*, when a boy and a girl have funny feelings for each other, and they want to *express* those feelings physically—”

“Sometimes a girl just wants her hair yanked and her ass spanked!” Brooklyn crows.

My face turns bright red. Poor Evelina's might be even worse. Her jaw drops, her eyes bulging wide as she turns to stare at me. "*Oh*," she croaks, her mouth snapping shut. "*Oh*, okay…" she mumbles. "Yeah, I… I get it now."

"Love ya, Evie," Milena giggles, hugging our shocked friend.

"No one is hurting me," I murmur quietly, leaning in close to her. "But thank you for the concern. Really."

"Okay, but now you really have to tell us who the hell you're banging," Milena declares..

"Woah, Naomi is *fucking* someone?!"

God. Fucking. *Dammit*.

Of course, this is *exactly* the moment Vaughn chooses to make his grand entrance, bearing a tray of shots with a few of his crew in tow.

"*No*, she is not," I mumble as the guys crash our table while Vaughn hands out the shots.

I know most of Vaughn's male friends—James and Miguel dance with us at the Zakharova, of course, Tate was once his roommate maybe, and Zion is a former-slash-current-slash-who-even-knows fuck buddy. Emphasis on "buddy". But also emphasis on "fuck".

"Cheers!"

Everyone clinks their shots together before downing them. I wince at the vodka burn but get it down before we all slam the glasses back onto the table.

"WOO!"

Milena groans as we glance over at Evie.

“Dude…” She gives Vaughn a dark look. “Did you seriously just feed her a shot of vodka? That’s like giving a four-year-old a Snickers bar right before bedtime.”

Vaughn chuckles. “Nah, she’s good…right, Evie-cakes?”

“I wanna daaaance!”

He grins widely as he turns back to Milena. “See? She’s great!”

Milena sighs but then gets sucked into a conversation with Miguel and James. Tate, who shamelessly hits on Brooklyn every time they cross paths, gets right to it. Brooklyn has no interest whatsoever: Tate is nice enough, but he’s also a total trust-fund douchebag who doesn’t work and just sort of…exists.

Just as I’m about to dive in to try and save her, I hear a throat being pointedly cleared beside me.

I turn to see Vaughn eying me with a hound-dog grin on his face.

“What?”

“Don’t fucking *what* me,” he snorts. “So?”

I shrug. “So….what?”

He rolls his eyes. “Finally went out and got some dick?”

I make a face. “Gross. Don’t put it like that.”

He chuckles. “But you *did*?”

I suck my lip between my teeth and take a quick sip of my drink. “*Maybe*,” I mumble.

He laughs, wrapping an arm over my shoulder. “Was it good?”

My face simmers. “No comment.”

His grin widens. “Yeah that’s a yes.” His brow arches. “And I can assume this dick belonged to the dickhead I got into that dust-up with behind the theater the other day?”

“*Definitely* no comment,” I groan.

Vaughn is gracious enough to let that one slide.

“Was he an asshole?”

I shake my head.

“And you had a good time?”

I bite down hard on my lip as I start to smile.

“Any regrets?”

I quickly and subtly shake my head side to side again.

Vaughn hugs me a little tighter. “Well then, a cheers is in order! You got laid, it was good, you don’t regret it.” He taps his beer to my champagne flute. “That’s what we call a fucking *win*, baby girl. And all’s well in the universe.”

We’re a few more rounds in and officially tipsy when Evelina’s face suddenly falls.

“Oh, *great*,” she mutters, ducking her head and trying to look invisible.

“What?” I ask, leaning in.

“My brother just got here.”

I follow her gaze to where Roman Nikitin is cutting through the crowd. He’s dressed in a black button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up halfway, black slacks, and his dark hair is slightly messed up in an “I have money” style.

There’s an energy in the way he moves through the club, his eyes sweeping the place, like he’s a storm that's already made peace with the idea that it’s about to destroy something.

“What’s so bad about your brother?” Miguel asks, frowning as he leans in.

“He just likes to ruin my night,” Evelina grumbles, crossing her arms. “He probably heard I was out and decided I need a babysitter.”

“You *do* need a babysitter,” Brooklyn says with a smirk as I bite back a laugh.

Roman makes his way toward the velvet-roped VIP area we’re sitting in, flanked by several men. One of them, all lean muscle and sharp cheekbones, lifts a hand in greeting to one of the bouncers standing by the entrance. I don’t *know*-know the guy, but I recognize him as Bane Antonov, whose father Nikolai runs the Antonov Bratva, which sits at the Iron Table with Evie and Roman’s father, Pavel.

Beside him, arms covered in Bratva ink and an unlit cigarette in his *way* too perfect lips, is Laz Kislev, whose father runs the Kislev Bratva, which answers to Bane’s father. Also with them is Mikhail Javanović, blue eyes glinting even in the low light of the club, his dark hair messed up in this devilishly perfect way that almost makes it look like he’s got horns like a bull curling out of his tangles.

Wow, I really *have* been friends with Evelina and Milena for a while if I can place all the guys who enter with Roman.

There's *two* major power blocs in the Bratva world: the Iron Table, which includes Evelina and Roman's dad as well as Bane's father, and the Bratva High Council, which Milena's father Marko sits on with Anastasia Javanović. From what I hear, she's one of the very few female Bratva heads out there. She's also Mikhail's aunt.

I've never actually figured out if the two Bratva power blocs get along or not. But their kids seem to get along just fine, at least in social situations.

I also spot Korol Duvnitsky, second-in-command in the Reznikov-Tsarenko Bratva, which also sits at the Bratva High Council.

I'd mention that Korol has hit on me *relentlessly* on the one or maybe two times we've crossed paths, but I'm also pretty sure Korol hits on anything that moves.

But it's the last guy that steps past the velvet ropes into the VIP area, a glass of whiskey in his tattooed hand, that makes me tense up: Nero De Luca, relatively new head of the De Luca Italian mafia family.

We've *also* crossed paths briefly before, and he's always got this feral, volatile sort of dark energy to him, like he does right now. Constantly pacing and moving, or cracking his tattooed knuckles, or absently tapping and tracing a finger down one of the scars on his tattooed, muscled arms.

Honestly, the man seems to breathe violence and malice. But that's not what has me stiffening when he walks toward us.

…It's the fact that I *know* he's friends with the Barone brothers.

My stomach twists.

And if *he's* here…

My eyes sweep the floor, the booths, the shadows, bracing myself to spot Nico lurking there, glaring at me for having dared defy him.

But I see nothing, and a shiver of relief slides down my spine.

“I need to dance,” Evelina says, grabbing my hand. “Before my brother decides I’ve had enough fun for one night.”

“*Excellent* idea,” I blurt, lurching to my feet. Brooklyn and Milena join us as we spill onto the dance floor, whooping it up as the crowd thickens around us—thumping music, bodies swaying, hands raised.

I let it wash over me, dulling the edges of my thoughts. My skin hums, nerves on fire, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

But then we get separated, and suddenly I’m not with my friends anymore. I can't even see them. I’m not panicked or anything, but I turn, trying to push my way through the crowd to find them again.

Someone brushes against my hip as the crowd of surging dancers sways around me. I freeze when a hand glides up my arm, sending a shiver down my spine.

It’s the scent that hits me first—leather and smoke. Clean and masculine.

Heat floods my body.

Panic. Thrill. Shame.

Want.

My breath stutters as Nico’s lips brush against my ear.

“I told you to *stay put*.”

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NAOMI

I FREEZE.

Every nerve lights up like it's been plugged straight into him.

His voice is like molten steel, with an edge to it that teases over my skin and makes my breath seize in my throat.

His hand captures my hip, fingers digging into my side and making the still-fresh bruises there throb with both dull pain and electrifying excitement. I can feel the heat of his body behind me—hot, hard, unmistakably Nico—and my thin dress does nothing to hide the shiver that rolls through me.

I try to turn around, but he doesn't let me.

"Nico—"

"*Quiet*," he growls over the thudding bass pounding and swirling around us.

Something panicky starts to bubble up my throat.

I'm in trouble.

This isn't playful. This isn't flirtatious.

He told me not to go out tonight. He looked me right in the eye and told me to stay put. And then I walked out of the apartment and came here anyway.

I defied him.

And now he's here—behind me—like a hurricane making landfall.

My heart slams in my chest. Heat crawls up my spine, spreads over my cheeks. I try to steady my breath, remind myself that he hasn't said anything yet, hasn't—

He presses his mouth to my ear again, dragging his nose down my throat.

"You thought I wouldn't notice what's *mine* going missing?"

His body presses tighter against me. My pulse catches.

He's…*hard*.

Extremely so, his hot, swollen cock pulsing against my ass through his slacks.

I'm suddenly more aware of the pressure of his chest against my back. The sharp inhalation at my neck. The steady, grounding sensation of his hand on my hip.

He's not dragging me out of here.

He's *holding* me.

Not like I'm his prisoner.

Like I'm what he came to find.

And suddenly, the fear in my chest melts into dark, heavy *want.*

Heat curls inside me, my skin tingling. All around us, people are dancing and drinking and cavorting, lost in the throbbing bass.

No one knows what’s happening right next to them.

What he’s doing to me.

What I’m letting him do.

He runs his palm down the front of my thigh, to the flirty hem of my dress. Suddenly, his hand is slipping underneath it.

“*Nico*!”

I try to stop him, my hands dropping to his wrist. I mean, for fuck’s sake, we’re *surrounded* by people.

But removing his hand is about as easy as it would be to detach *my own* hand from my arm right now.

There’s no stopping him. His fingers trace up my inner thigh, under the dress. My eyes go wide, darting all around me as if expecting everyone around us to whirl and suddenly call me out for being a slut. Like they can all *tell* what he’s doing.

But no one turns. No one stares. It’s dark, and everyone’s drunk or caught up in their own thing.

No one can see what he’s doing to me—or if they do, they don’t care.

My whimper catches in my chest as two of his thick fingers drag up my slit through my lacy panties.

“*Already so fucking wet for me*,” he growls into my ear.

I try to turn, even though he’s still pinning me hard against his chest and fat, throbbing erection.

“Nico—”

“You don’t get to say my name tonight, Naomi,” he murmurs, rolling his fingers over my swollen clit through my panties. “Not until I decide you’ve earned it.”

I close my eyes, my body caught in a war between shame and something worse.

Craving.

His mouth drags along the curve of my neck. My breath hitches as his hand grasps my hip harder, pulling me tight to him as he grinds his cock against my ass and rubs my clit under the dress.

Around us, the crowd is too thick, too drunk, too lost in the music to notice what’s happening. Even so, my heart pounds like it’s trying to escape.

“*Hold still*,” Nico growls against my body.

His fingers slip under the edge of my panties, open my folds, and sink deep inside. My mouth falls open in a silent scream as he grinds his palm against my clit, stroking his thick fingers against my g-spot.

“You wanted to be bad, Naomi. You chose to defy me. So I came here to *remind you* what happens to bad girls who disobey.”

My hips jerk when his fingers slide out and glide slickly over my clit. He holds my hip harder, keeping me still as his hand between my legs toys with me, circling my needy clit enough to make my knees buckle.

“Don’t come yet,” he warns. “Not until I say so.”

My head spins. I’m standing in the middle of a dance floor, surrounded by hundreds of people. I don’t know where my friends are. I don’t even *care.*

All I care about is him.

He presses his cock against me through his pants, grinding slow and hard as his hand brings me closer to the edge.

“You’re dripping,” he murmurs. “And in *public*.” He leans into me and nips my neck with his teeth, just under my ear. “*What a dirty little slut I’ve found*.”

I can’t speak.

Can’t even think.

All I know is that he’s spinning me around and yanking me hard against him. He reaches between us, and my reality glitches when he tugs his zipper down and I feel the hot pulse of his bare, thick cock slip up between my thighs as his fingers yank my panties to the side.

“Lift your leg,” he purrs against my mouth, his lips less than an inch from mine.

I don’t even hesitate. I just raise my leg and wrap it around his hip, my heel digging into the back of his thigh. My dress hikes higher until I feel the cool rush of air kiss my bare skin.

Nico shifts against me, pressing his hips forward and angling his cock against my dripping wet lips. To the casual observer, it just looks like we’re grinding in an especially dirty way. My dress is still keeping *that* part from view.

The crowd pulses around us, oblivious.

The music surges.

Nico breathes against my lips like he owns every inch of my body.

“You wanted to be bad,” he murmurs. “This is your punishment.”

I gasp loudly as the thick head of his cock presses hot and hard and pulsing against my pussy, the piercing at the tip adding another layered dimension of stimulus to my throbbing nerves.

“*Nico*—” I choke.

“Shut up,” he grunts. “Take my cock like a bad girl.”

He drives into me with one quick, powerful thrust, stealing the breath from my lungs. My leg trembles around him. My head falls back.

The crowd moves. The lights flash. And no one knows what’s happening in the center of it all.

He starts to pump—short, brutal strokes that make me whimper with every slam of his hips. One of his hands slides under my dress and grips my ass, the other tangles in my hair as he fucks me deeper.

“This pussy is mine,” he snarls. “You don’t take it out dancing unless I say so.”

“Yours,” I moan, clinging to his muscled arms and shoulders as he rams into me.

“Say it again.”

“*Yours*!” I choke.

He growls low in his throat. The sound rumbles through his chest, vibrating against mine. His thrusts get harder. Rougher. His cock drives deeper, over and over, until my knees threaten to give out and my breath dissolves into helpless little gasps I can’t control.

I’m shaking. Lost. Shattering, held together only by the brutal rhythm of his body against mine and the way his hands grip me like he’ll never let go.

His mouth finds my shoulder, biting down hard enough to leave a mark. His free hand slides up and mauls my breasts, making me choke in pleasure. His fingers pinch my tight nipples through the dress, sending me higher as my hips roll frantically against him.

His cock just keeps getting bigger, swelling harder inside me, making me tighter and tighter around him until I feel impossibly full and utterly claimed.

"*Mine*," he rasps into my lips as his fat cock rams into me over and over, dragging over my throbbing clit as the world melts around me. "Fucking *mine*."

The way he says *mine* makes something inside me break and snap.

His cock rails into me, curving deep inside me as he twists my nipples and grips my ass. And that fucking piercing…*GOD*. It's like a perfect stroke against my g-spot over and over.

And suddenly, his mouth erases the tiny distance between it and mine and he's kissing me like he wants to devour me whole.

It's the final straw. Instantly, I'm coming—*hard*.

Around him. On him.

For him.

I shriek into his mouth, nails raking down his arms and shoulders, hips bucking as the orgasm explodes through me.

I'm heedless of anything else around me: the crowd, the music, any of it.

All I know is the sheer ecstasy of shattering around him as I melt into oblivion.

Nico hisses a curse and slams into me one final time, buried so deep I swear I can feel him in my throat, letting go with a groan that's half fury, half *worship*. Another orgasm slams over me, sucking the air from my lungs as his cum spills inside me, thick and hot.

I cling to him, boneless.

Ruined, in the most beautiful way.

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NAOMI

MY PHONE IS VIBRATING.

Like, *aggressively* so.

I fumble for it blindly, dragging it from under Nico's pillow. My eyes barely open before the screen lights up, nearly blinding me.

Fuck.

I have *thirty-seven* unread messages on my "Ballet Bitches" group chat with Milena, Brooklyn, Evelina, Bianca, and Lyra.

I blink the sleep out of my eyes, try to sit up, and immediately regret it.

My thighs ache. My hips are sore. My neck feels like it's been kissed, bitten, and marked within an inch of its life—which, to be fair, it has.

And my pussy is…

Jesus.

Fucking *ouch*.

Even as I wince, another sensation ripples through me, deliciously achy, as I relive the night before: first at the club, partially in the car on the way back

here, and then, after Nico carried me inside, against the front door of his loft, on the floor, then finally here.

I glance toward the other side of the bed, frowning when I find it empty.

Meanwhile my phone keeps pinging, so I sigh, rub my eyes, and open the messages.

BROOKLYN

MYSTERY SOLVED!

BROOKLYN

Although you could have at least said good night when you left!

LYRA

GIRL, DETAILS. WTAF!!!

MILENA

Guess we know where those FUCK BRUISES came from, lol!

BROOKLYN

lmao

LYRA

NAOMI! Wake your ass up! We have pressing questions!

EVELINA

He’s HOT. Like, seriously hot. What the hell, Naomi???

I scramble out of bed, throwing on shorts and a hoodie as my phone continues to blow up. This time, it’s a non-group text from Vaughn.

VAUGHN

You know, your problems in rehearsal makes sense now. I’m surprised you can even walk after getting dicked-down by THAT dude.

VAUGHN

My opinion stands that he’s a psycho prick. But that motherfucker’s got big dick energy for daaaays.

VAUGHN

Do you need ice packs? A chiropractor? A priest?

ME

WTF dude

ME

Why is everyone texting me about this?!?

VAUGHN

Fuck. Sorry, baby girl. Tabloids caught you outside the club last night and it started making the rounds this morning.

He sends me a link to the *New York Globe*, and when the headline fills my screen, my hand clamps over my mouth and my stomach drops.

Holy fucking shit.

> “SCANDAL: Secretary Kim’s Ballerina Daughter Caught In WILD Affair With Barone Mafia Prince!”

The headline is bad enough. The photos beneath it are ten times worse.

Nico and I, pressed against the brick wall in the alley next to Doomsday last night, his mouth on mine and my thigh pulled up to his hip.

Another of him leading me to his car, his hand on my lower back. The next of us *making out* in the car. The ones after that are him carrying me into his building, my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck.

Suddenly, I flick back to the group text and scroll up, scanning the messages in a panic.

Bianca’s not replying.

* * *

MY HEART IS STILL SLAMMING in my chest as I jump out of the Uber literally before it comes to a stop outside Bianca and Kratos' East Village brownstone.

Fuck. She's going to hate me.

That's a cardinal friend rule, right? No hooking up with your friends' siblings?

It's *absolutely* a rule, and I stomped all over it.

Lyra getting together with Carmine was different. Sort of. Carmine needed a wife in order to take over the throne from Vito and become don of the Barone family. Lyra needed money, so she crashed the "audition" that Carmine was holding to find someone that he'd pay to be said wife.

I've spent the cab ride over here trying to convince myself that's *way* worse than my situation with Nico. *That* was outright bamboozlement, and Bianca's only worry was for Lyra, since Carmine is…well, *Carmine*.

I.e., a fucking psychopath.

Nico and I aren't like that. Sure, there are some…*darker* elements to it: the blackmail. The video. All of it.

Crap.

That opens up so many other cans of worms, and I quite honestly don't know if I'll ever be able to tell anyone about them all.

But without those mitigating circumstances, this is just me sneaking around with Bianca's fucking brother behind her back.

Which officially makes me the worst friend on the planet.

I'm halfway up the steps to the brownstone's front entrance when it opens.

Kratos fills the doorway as he stands there, barefoot in dark jeans and a gray henley shirt, smirking as I stumble to a breathless stop in front of him.

“Naomi,” he says, like he’s been expecting me.

“I—” I stammer. “I didn’t mean to—God, I didn’t even know—the pictures—”

He holds up a hand.

“Relax,” he says. “She’s not upset.”

I blink. “She’s *not*?”

He chuckles—actually *chuckles*—and leans against the doorframe.

“I think she just has some…questions.”

He gives me a pointed look.

“*I* do, too. But talk to Bianca first.”

He steps aside, nodding toward the stairs.

“She’s upstairs on her mandated bed rest. Try not to give her a heart attack.”

My mouth opens. Then closes. I give him a weak nod and head for the stairs on shaky legs with a heart that won’t slow down.

I knock lightly on the door to Bianca and Kratos’ room as I step inside, feeling like I’ve done something *wrong.*

Which is stupid. We’re not in high school. I didn’t get caught sneaking in past curfew. I’m not sleeping with her boyfriend.

Just her brother.

Her dangerous, morally unstable, mafia prince brother.

Bianca’s propped up in bed, surrounded by vases of flowers, an *insane* number of pillows, and an aggressive number of romance paperbacks. Her long dark hair is braided and hanging over one shoulder, and she’s reading one of said paperbacks with her mouth open in a shocked “O”.

She glances up when I walk in, her face turning red.

“Shit, you scared me.” She holds up the book with a guilty grin. “Fuckin’ Booktok got to me. The *spice*…holy shit,” she giggles, tossing the book aside.

I smile weakly as she arches a brow.

“I saw the pictures,” she says, tilting her head. “You wanna start, or should I?”

Well, so much for easing into the conversation

“I didn’t mean for it to happen. It just—” I wave my hands uselessly. “It just *did*. And I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to make things weird, and—”

“Naomi,” she cuts in gently. “I’m not *mad*.” She laughs lightly. “Why does everyone think I’d be mad if my friends dated my brothers?”

I make a face. “Because you’re not supposed to hook up with your friend’s brother. It’s a rule.”

She frowns. “I don’t think that’s a thing.”

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

She grins. “I think that’s just in romcoms, and it’s only guys. Like, you don’t bang your buddy’s sister. You know?”

I point to one of the books lying on her comforter. “You’re literally reading a book that has ‘best friend’s brother’ and ‘forbidden’ on the cover.”

She rolls her eyes. “Dude, it’s *fiction*. Welcome to the real world.” She shakes her head. “I’m *not mad*, Naomi.”

I blink.

“You’re not?”

She exhales. “Well… I wasn’t thrilled to find out via *the tabloids.* But… no.”

I sink onto the edge of her bed, twisting my hands in my lap. “I just… I didn’t know how to tell you. And Nico and I aren’t even—”

“Naomi?”

I pause, my lip pulling between my teeth as I look up at her.

“Without going into details that trust me, you *do not* want to hear…” She blushes. “Believe me when I say that I get unconventional when it comes to relationships.” Then she gives me a sharp look. “But I do want to know he’s treating you right.”

I open my mouth to answer, but nothing comes out.

How do I explain that this started with blackmail? That it still *is*, technically?

I mean, he still has the footage.

And yet… It doesn’t feel like I’m trapped anymore.

It feels like I’m being *kept.*

Like I’m being taken care of in a way that’s impossible to explain to anyone who hasn’t lived in that space between power and surrender. Between fear and want.

When he touches me, when he looks at me the way he does…

I don’t feel owned.

I feel *cherished*.

And, God help me, I like it.

Bianca leans back against the headboard, automatically resting a hand on the still barely-there curve of her belly.

We sit in silence for a moment, letting the sound of the city outside fill the room.

“I didn’t mean to hide it from you, truly. I just…didn’t know what it *was*. And now it’s out there and I feel like I can’t take a full breath.”

She tilts her head, sympathetic. “Because it’s real now?”

“Because it’s *messy*,” I murmur. “And… Maybe I like it more than I should.”

“You can always come to me,” she says with a small smile. “Whatever Nico is to you, I mean, c’mon, I already think of you as family.”

I don’t trust myself to speak.

Bianca shifts a little, adjusting the pillows around her. “You can tell me anything,” she says gently. “Anytime. You know that, right?”

The words hit harder than I expect and something in me cracks open.

I’ve been telling myself forever that nothing changed after Mom died. But it did.

My dad turned away, burying himself in handshakes and campaign slogans. I threw myself into dancing, letting it consume me. I pushed my body past its limits every day, hoping I could outrun the ache I didn’t want to name.

I’ve always said I’m lucky to have friends like Bianca, Milena, Lyra, Evelina and Brooklyn, but I’ve never let myself need them.

Never acknowledged that they’re *not* just friends, they’re my family.

I nod, trying to blink back the sudden sting in my eyes.

Then it comes rushing back—like floodwaters breaking through a dam.

The photoshoot. The coldness and the raw, naked fear as darkness pulled me from my body. The sickening feeling of waking up with no memory and…*cum* on my skin.

It all claws back to the surface, dragging me under.

“Naomi?”

I flinch, jolting a little as I snap back to reality, my eyes flicking to Bianca’s.

Her brow furrows. “Is everything okay? I mean…” She grins. “Aside from the thing with my brother.”

“I—”

Her concern deepens as she takes my hands. “Hey, talk to me. Whatever it is—”

“Bianca, I—”

My phone rings.

Fuck.

The moment passes as I glance down, and when I see the name flashing on the screen, my heart drops.

It's my dad.

Dad, who hasn't called me back, or even texted once in the weeks I've been trying to get a hold of him. Which means I'm pretty sure the timing of this call, given the tabloid story published this morning, is anything *but* coincidence.

I hit the decline button and drag my eyes back to Bianca.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I—"

Shit.

My momentary courage to tell her what happened, my ability to face that shame and darkness again, has evaporated.

I shake my head, forcing a smile. "So… Any more heartbeats I can listen to?"

Bianca lets a curious look linger on me. Then she shakes it away—either because she's really shaking it off, or because she can tell I *want her* to shake it off.

Probably door number two.

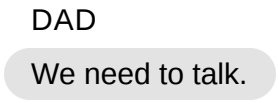
"Yeah!" she beams, opening her phone. "They gave me another ultrasound yesterday. All good, super strong heartbeat. Kratos is convinced this kid is going to be a pro athlete."

“Not a Spartan warrior?”

She rolls her eyes, grinning. “We’ll see.”

My phone buzzes in my lap.

I glance down.



A cold shiver rips up my spine. I shove it away, forcing a smile to my face, leaning closer to Naomi’s phone to listen to the sound file of the baby’s heartbeat.

My phone buzzes again.

Dad: NOW, Naomi.

Shit.

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NICO

THE FIRST BODY is slumped over a card table, face down in a pool of blood and scattered poker chips. The second is across from him, his face similarly planted in a red, wet pile of playing cards and money.

The third is slumped over sideways in the corner under a neon exit sign, like he just happened to bleed out mid-cigarette. The fourth is halfway out the back door, his bloodied hand still wrapped around a fistful of hundreds.

Nero is standing over the first guy, his sleeves up to his elbows, gloves on, half-unbuttoned shirt streaked with drying blood, a lit cigarette dangling from his lips.

Roman walks in behind me, nose wrinkling. “What the *fuck*, Nero?”

“Gloves are over there,” Nero says casually. “If the smell gets to you…I dunno, light one of these.” He tosses Roman, who doesn’t smoke, a pack of cigarettes.

“Yeah, or *don’t*,” I growl, snatching the pack from Roman’s hand. “Don’t light anything, for that matter.”

I nod my chin at the shelf on the far wall of the basement room, peppered with bullet holes, and the gallon bottle of paint thinner on one of said

shelves, dripping the last of its contents all over the floor in a big, smelly, *highly* flammable puddle.

Nero follows my gaze, his brow furrowing. Not out of concern for the massive explosion waiting to happen, but like he's wildly curious about what might happen if that explosion actually occurred.

Nero is fucking *nuts*. I tend to think of him as "Carmine-adjacent": not *quite* the same level of psychopath that my brother is, but not far off.

But where Carmine is methodical, rigid, and utterly in control in that Dexter way he has, Nero is the exact opposite.

He's a lunatic. Unhinged, manic, and basically a reincarnation of his namesake, the mad Roman Emperor Nero, known for his barbarism and debauchery.

And *this* is the guy in charge of the De Luca mafia family.

God fucking help us all.

He's still staring almost lovingly at the puddle of paint thinner, a canine grin on his face, when I walk over and snatch the cigarette from his lips.

"Rude," he snaps pettishly.

"I just feel like *living* past the next five fucking minutes, if that's okay with you. My apologies," I grunt, dropping the cigarette into a glass of whiskey and melted ice.

"*Fuck. Me*."

Laz walks in behind Roman, an amused look on that pretty-boy face of his that made him so ridiculously popular with girls while we were at Knightsblood together. His brows arch, surveying the carnage.

“Glad I answered *this* text,” he grins, his tone devoid of sarcasm.

Laz and Nero share the same fascination with blood, bodies, and violence.

“What the fuck actually happened here?” Roman grunts, nodding to the holes in the wall and shattered light fixtures.

Nero shrugs, lifting the guy at the table up by a handful of hair and tipping his head back, his mouth falling slackly open.

“You really wanna know?”

Roman frowns. “Why the boss of the De Luca family is down here getting blood on his shoes? Like fuck I wanna know. Isn’t the whole point of being the boss having underlings?”

Nero glances up. A wild glint flickers in his eye. “And let them have all the fun?” He blows air through tight lips. “As fucking *if*. Anyway, if you guys want in, there are more hedge clippers and pliers in that bag in the hallway.”

I snort a dry laugh and turn to glance at Roman, who has a sour look on his face.

“When you said you needed help cleaning up some bodies, Nero,” he mutters, “I assumed you meant rolling them in tarps and putting them in a trunk.”

“Nah,” Nero shrugs. “They’re staying here. I just need to…*sanitize* first.”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a pair of pliers. Then he leans over the dead guy’s open mouth and starts to stick the pliers inside.

“Oh, *hell* fucking no,” Roman rumbles as I chuckle. “Absolutely not.”

“*Pussy*,” Nero retorts, the room suddenly filling with the horrifying sound of a tooth being yanked out of its socket.

Wetly.

Roman makes a face. “I’ll do fingers. I’m not *touching* teeth. Fucking filthy.”

“I’ll play dentist,” Laz shrugs casually.

“A true officer and a gentleman,” Nero murmurs, peering into the mouth before him and going in once again.

I grab the gym bag from the hallway and hand Laz a pair of pliers, grabbing garden shears for Roman and myself. We each take one of the guys away from the table, the *snip-snip* sound of shears cutting through flesh and bone contrasting with the disgusting dental sounds behind us.

“Hey, speaking of pussy,” Nero grunts. “Roman, where the fuck did you go last night? You had those two blondes all over you and you just dipped out.”

"Seriously," Laz grunts. “You left those poor girls hanging, their mouths still open." Laz grins. “Luckily, I was there to help *fill* those mouths."

Roman scowls. "I was drunk."

"You were *shitfaced*," Nero corrects.

Roman shrugs, clipping off another finger from the body he’s squatting down beside. “Just having a good time.”

“Not as good a time as I did after you left," Laz chuckles.

I shake my head, methodically cutting. My thoughts aren’t on Nero or the bloodstains or whatever war he’s clearly fighting within his own house.

They’re on Naomi.

The way she danced. The way she moaned for me, barely hidden by the bass and the lights and her dress as I rammed into her, taking her there on

the dancefloor.

The way she came apart, squeezing my cock with her tight little pussy.

I shouldn't have let it go that far. I shouldn't have touched her like that, not *there*, where people could have seen.

But I'd do it again. Over and over. And fuck anyone who—

"You were busy last night too, I hear," Nero says, like he's reading my mind.

What?

I blink, stopping mid-cut, keeping my head turned away.

Roman chuckles. "Fucking the good Congressman's daughter?" He grins and shakes his head. "What's the play there? Film a sex tape and send it to her dad—"

I slam into him, my forearm against his throat as I pin him to the bullet-riddled wall behind him.

"The *fuck* is your fucking problem!" he snarls, shoving me back and *almost* throwing me off him. But I manage to keep my grip and my footing, slamming him back against the wall again.

"Take it easy!" he hisses. "Jesus, I was just making a joke—"

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?" I spit.

Roman frowns. His eyes slip past my shoulder to Laz and Nero standing behind me. Then they drag back to me. "Have you…not seen it?"

"Seen *what*?"

"Nico."

When I glance around, Nero is holding up his phone.

Fuck.

> “SCANDAL: Secretary Kim’s Ballerina Daughter Caught In WILD Affair With Barone Mafia Prince!”

On the screen is a photo—Naomi against the club wall, her lips crushed under mine, her leg wrapped around my hip.

There’s another of me carrying her into my building.

Something hot and violent surges up my throat.

Not shame.

Not guilt.

Rage.

She belongs to *me*. Not the tabloids, not a bunch of fucking strangers to gawk at and talk about or even *think* about.

“Nico.”

Roman’s voice is still edged but devoid of anger as he grabs my arm and gently prys it away from his throat. I allow it, taking a step back, my shoulders tight.

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“It’s fine,” I growl.

“So are you…” He frowns. “Like, seeing her? Naomi, I mean.”

I don’t answer.

Saying it out loud might make it too real.

Nero catches his phone as I toss it to him, then I drop my hedge trimmers on the card table.

“Clean up your own mess,” I say. “I need to go deal with something. And are we good?” I grunt, turning to Roman. He nods back at me.

“You know we’re good, man.”

Nero, meanwhile, makes a face. “You’re seriously leaving?”

“I think you can manage four fucking bodies without me.”

“But you’re gonna miss the bonfire!”

He grins, holding up his Zippo and nodding eagerly at the puddle of paint thinner.

“Just save me a fucking s’more,” I growl as I turn and march out the door.

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NICO

By the time I get back to the penthouse, I've almost convinced myself I'm calm.

Spoiler: I'm not.

Naomi's in our dressing room when I walk in, her back to me, buttoning up a soft gray blouse over a knee-length black pencil skirt. She looks like she's about to go take the Bar Exam or apply to Harvard.

"I'm going to see my father."

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror for a second before she drops her gaze and smooths the fabric over her hips.

She doesn't say anything else. She doesn't have to. It's clear from the stiffness in her body and the tightness in her face that she's seen the tabloid article.

And now she's on her way to go meet the man who orchestrated the attack that nearly killed my sister?

I don't say anything. I honestly don't know what the fuck *to* say right now.

I forbid it?

Over my dead body?

Get on your knees and I'll fuck that mouth into submission for daring even to think about it?

Instead, I lean against the doorframe and just…watch her. My fingers twitch with the need to grab her. Keep her *here,* with me.

If I let her go, she might not come back the same.

She might not come back at all.

But I find myself immobile, just standing there, staring at the woman I was supposed to ruin.

That was the plan. A calculated chessboard move: use her and destroy her.

Punish Leonard by breaking his golden child, and leaving the mess at his door.

That's…not the plan anymore.

I don't know when it changed, or how, but it did.

Somewhere between her walking into my office and me fucking her on that stage, she stopped being leverage and became the one thing I want to keep.

She slowly turns to face me, her lip worrying between her teeth as if she knows exactly what I'm thinking. Her eyes slowly lift to mine.

"Look, there's…" my brow knits. "There's a new player in New York; dangerous, well-funded, *very* well organized." I grit my teeth, trying to decide how much to tell her.

"They may have been behind the car-bombing."

I look away.

“Nico.”

Her fingers brush my jaw, turning my gaze back to met hers.

“Your father may have hired them to do so.”

She’s heard this before, and she does an admirable job of keeping her face completely neutral.

But I don’t miss the wince in the corners of her eyes. The way the tendons alongside her neck stand out for a second, like she’s biting back a bitter grimace.

“I can get the truth from him.”

My brows pull tight. “What?”

Her voice doesn’t shake. “If my father was behind what happened at your family’s house—if he had anything to do with the bombing—I want to hear him say it.”

I’m trying to figure out what the hell I’m looking at.

This isn’t the trembling girl I tied to my bed. This is a woman about to walk into a den of wolves and demand answers.

For *me*.

“Naomi—”

“I’m not doing it for *you*,” she says quickly.

Fucking little mind reader.

“He’s my father, but that doesn’t mean blind loyalty. If he did this…if he hurt people I care about...then blood means nothing.”

Her voice wavers slightly on the word *care.*

I take a step toward her.

“To be clear: I’m *not asking* you to do this,” I murmur.

“I know.”

I stare at her. Trying to memorize this beautiful version of her—the fire in her eyes, the purpose in her stance.

But then she smirks. A little too bitterly and quickly.

“What’s the matter, Nico?” she says with a smirk as she slips past me. “Worried about me? Or just worried I’ll be late for your next little game?”

The joke hits harder than I expect, and for once, I don’t parry.

Instead I whirl, grab her arm, and spin her back to face me. Her breath catches as my hand possessively cups her jaw.

“*Yes*,” I say quietly. “I’m worried about you.”

She blinks. The sarcasm fades. Her mask cracks.

“Well,” she says quietly, “I’ll just have to be careful, then.”

I shake my head. “I don’t like this meeting idea.”

She smiles. “Good thing it’s not *you* going to it.”

Then, without any preamble, she gets up on her tiptoes, leans in, and kisses me.

“I’ll call you after.”

Yeah, *not me* already planning to spend the next however many hours staring at my phone, waiting for that fucking call.

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NAOMI

ATRIUM, the three-Michelin-star restaurant my father has picked for our "catch up", is one of those "see and be seen" type places—all glass, obviously, so that the peasants outside on Columbus Circle can witness the grand, glamorous lives of the rich and privileged.

Naturally, Leonard's booked a window seat.

He's already there when I arrive—perfect posture, cufflinks gleaming in the early afternoon sun, the New York skyline and Central Park framing him like a campaign ad.

There's a good chance…I figure, oh, about seventy percent…that someone will be taking pictures of us during this lunch *for* a campaign ad.

Dad smiles as I approach. Not warmly. Not like a father seeing his daughter for the first time in weeks. Just a poised, practiced smile.

For the cameras.

He stands just long enough to offer me a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. Then he's back in his seat, napkin folded across his lap with robotic precision. I'm not blind to the flash of cameras outside on the street,

followed by the rapid *click-click-click* of a professional camera somewhere behind us in the restaurant.

Yep, raising those campaign ad photo-op odds to *one hundred* percent.

He looks good, I'll give him that. Every hair in place, shirt collar crisp, watch gleaming. He works out religiously, has done so my entire life. Eats at the same time every day. Sleeps exactly seven hours a night.

Leonard Kim has always treated life like a machine—perfect inputs leading to flawless outcomes. But somewhere along the way, he stopped treating me like part of the equation.

I sit, legs crossed, hands folded prettily in my lap, trying not to feel the sting of memories.

When I was little, he'd scoop me up in those strong arms, lifting me high in the air and twirling me around until I screamed with laughter. Mom would pretend to scold him from the hallway, her hair still pinned up from rehearsal, her voice filled with quiet joy.

Corinne Kim.

She was a dancer long before she was a politician's wife. A wonderful one—trained at Juilliard, invited to join the Joffrey. And then she gave it all up for him.

Mom was the glue, and when she died, something cracked in both of us, though we never said it out loud. Without her, all Dad saw when he looked at me was a living, breathing grief he didn't want to carry.

He lets the silence linger just long enough for me to squirm.

I don't.

Leonard smiles again—smooth, practiced, like he always does during press junkets and donor brunches. The kind of smile that looks good in photos because it never wrinkles the corners of the eyes.

“Well,” he says casually, meticulously adjusting his cuffs. “I suppose I should say congratulations.”

My stomach clenches. “For?”

His brows lift, faux-surprised. “For becoming the media’s favorite mystery girlfriend du jour.”

There it is.

Straight to the point, now that the photo op has been secured.

He turns his water glass meditatively between his fingers. “Do you know how many calls I got this morning, Naomi? How many aides asking for statements? The level of damage control I had to implement?”

I keep my back straight, my face calm. “I didn’t realize your staff managed your daughter’s personal life.”

“They do when it’s on the front page of the *New York Globe*,” he says, still smiling.

I swallow, eyeing him.

“You’re angry because of your reputation.”

“Do I *look* angry?”

“No, because the cameras are right outside. It’s not like I’ve *forgotten* how you operate, Dad,” I sigh.

“No, just your good sense,” he says tightly, *still* smiling for the fucking cameras. “You know, it wasn’t exactly on my schedule to fly to New York

today.”

“*So sorry* to inconvenience you,” I hiss through clenched teeth, starting to stand.

Dad’s hand lands on forearm, just heavily enough to get my attention.

“Sit, Naomi.”

I glare at him.

“*Please*,” he adds.

I do.

“I supposed it also wasn’t on your schedule to call me back?” I fire back. “Text me? Even have someone *else* text me pretending to be you?”

He draws a deep breath. “Naomi, it’s been a busy transitional period for me. You know how demanding something can be when you’re fully committed to it.” He directs a perfect, capped smile at me. “You have your dancing, I have my career, which…” He chuckles. “Feels a lot like dancing at times. Perhaps we’re more alike than we realize.”

Yeah, we’re not.

Dad takes another slow breath. “What are you doing with that man, Naomi?”

“I don’t think that’s a conversion a father wants to have with his daughter, is it?”

That’s *way* beyond anything I would normally say, especially to him. But I say it anyway, just to try to get some reaction other than that fake, phony smile.

For second, there’s the smallest crack in his facade: a small flicker of disgust in his eyes, his lips turning down just a little as he grits his teeth.

I’ll call it a win, even if he fixes it immediately.

“You’re smarter than this, Naomi.”

The insult wrapped in silk. The tactic he’s always used to get me back in line.

“You really thought there wouldn’t be consequences to being seen with someone like *him*? Naomi, Nico Barone is—”

Fire flares in my chest.

“I *know* who he is.”

His smile doesn’t waver. But his voice drops. “Then *act* like it.”

I take a breath. Hold it. Let it out.

And then the question I wasn’t even sure I was going to have the courage to ask comes rattling right out, too.

“Did you have anything to do with the bombing at the Barone house?”

Dad’s smile freezes for a beat too long.

Then it rearranges itself back into place like it never cracked.

“If that’s a joke, I’m not sure I quite understand it,” he says, voice lighter than it should be.

“What if it’s not?” I say pointedly. “A joke, I mean.”

Dad’s brow furrows deeply. “Christ, Naomi. Do you honestly think I’m capable of something like that?”

“I didn’t say you were,” I reply. “I asked if you had anything to *do* with it.”

Leonard leans back, folding his hands neatly in his lap. “Naomi, really—”

The waiter approaches, menus in hand, hovering like he’s afraid to interrupt. Leonard smiles at him warmly and confidently, like nothing’s wrong at all.

“We’ll need another moment,” he says kindly. The waiter nods and backs away.

Leonard’s eyes return to me.

“I would never be involved in anything so unsavory. You know that.”

“Do I?” I ask quietly.

He sighs, like I’ve inconvenienced him with the question. “Let’s pretend, for the sake of argument, that I am,” he says, shaking his head. “Let’s say I’m secretly a deranged, blood-spilling criminal…” He smiles icily. “Like your boyfriend.”

I grit my teeth.

“Even assuming all that, we’re still faced with the reality that I’ve just been appointed to a goddamn *Cabinet seat*, Naomi. Do you understand what kind of scrutiny I’m under? Do you really think I’d risk my entire *career* by playing games with a family like the Barones?”

“Just answer the question,” I say. “Did you or did you not have anything to do with the Syndicate attack?”

Leonard’s eyes flash for a second. Then he exhales and shakes his head, like I’m a child who doesn’t understand how the world works.

“Politics is a dirty business,” he says softly. “You’re old enough now, Naomi, to understand that.” His eyes lance into me. “But I would *never*—never, in a million *years*—be involved with a group like the Obsidian Syndicate.”

Everything inside me goes still.

I think my pulse actually stops for a beat as reality shifts and tilts.

I never said “obsidian”. Only “syndicate.”

But he did.

It’s like an icy blade sliding between my ribs.

I feel myself go cold, muscles tensing as I try to suppress the shiver rippling down my spine. My fingers tighten in my lap.

Dad doesn’t seem to notice.

His voice softens again.

“I appreciate this thing with Nico might be thrilling or feel *dangerous*. But don’t let it confuse you or shake you from who you are. Look, I can’t tell you who to date or not date. But if nothing else, think of your damn future! After dance is over, you’ll have a whole other career just waiting for you.”

When my lips purse, he takes it as confusion, even though I know *exactly* what he’s talking about.

“Can you *imagine* the leg up you’ll have, being my daughter? With our last name, power, and connections? You could skip the local stuff and go straight into a national race, Naomi. You could be a congresswoman at *twenty-five*, for God’s sake. Think of the doors that would open for you!”

My God.

In that moment, I see everything I've tried not to admit.

The man sitting across from me isn't just a politician. Not merely a bad father.

He's a man who *lies so well he doesn't even know he's doing it*. There is no right or wrong, just the path forward that he's laid out to meet his own ends and goals.

Slowly, I fold my napkin and place it beside my untouched glass.

Dad is still talking. I'm no longer listening.

He's gone back to the usual script—political concern, fatherly disappointment, words that sound like care but feel like a lecture. This is a PR rehearsal, not love.

When I stand he finally stops, his brows knitting.

"Naomi," he says quietly. "Don't overreact. This doesn't have to be anything."

"You're right," I say softly. "It doesn't."

I turn and walk out of the restaurant without looking back.

Outside, the air hits like ice. I don't realize how hard I'm shaking until I reach out and press a palm against the cold glass of the building next to the restaurant to ground myself.

It's not just the lie. It's the way he said it.

I turn and start to walk aimlessly. I don't know where I'm going, but I know what I'm walking away from.

I wanted *so badly* to believe that the man who used to spin me around in the kitchen and let me fall asleep on his chest during late-night debates was still

there.

But he’s gone. Maybe he died with my mother.

He’s not my father anymore.

Just another lie I grew up believing in.

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NAOMI

I FIND Nico in our massive mirrored walk-in closet when I get home, and my core clenches as I drink in the sight of him: perfectly tailored black slacks, crisp white button-down shirt molding to every plane and groove of his hard, muscled torso. It's half-unbuttoned, showing the chiseled, tattooed slabs of his chest.

His eyes catch mine the second I walk in.

"How'd it go?" he asks.

I blink. "Hmm?"

His lips curl into a small smile. "Leonard."

Right.

I'm still thrown by how good he looks. Clean-shaven. Hair damp, combed back. And…cologne.

He looks *hot*. And not in the usual way. This isn't brooding-in-a-dark-corner Nico in black jeans and leather jacket. This is hot-spy-from-an-Armani-ad Nico.

"It was…" I shake my head. "Fine. He's not a fan of yours."

Nico smirks. “Imagine that.”

“But I set a trap for him,” I add sadly. “And he walked right into it.”

Nico looks up sharply, noticing the way my voice falls. “How so?”

“I asked him if he’d been involved in the bombing, and he said no, he had no idea who the *Obsidian* Syndicate was.”

His face darkens, and his eyes flicker.

“He didn’t even blink,” I continue, my voice cracking. “I only said ‘syndicate.’ But he said the full thing.”

Nico steps closer, jaw tight.

“I’m sorry, Naomi.”

He doesn’t seem surprised in the slightest. It makes me feel like even more of an idiot *for* being surprised.

Nico turns, grabbing a tie from one of the drawers. Then a jacket from a hook near the door.

“Are you going out?” I ask dully.

“Yeah.” He glances at me. “Sorry. I know you just had the whole Leonard thing. But I have to deal with something. Business.” He smirks a little as he turns to me. “What don’t you order whatever you like for dinner, open some good wine, and watch something trashy until I get home.”

My brows knit.

Business? Wearing cologne?

But I don’t say anything, because I know much doing so would make sound like world’s most insecure girlfriend.

Especially since I’m not a girlfriend.

I’m not…anything.

I fold my arms, watching him shrug on his jacket, the fabric molding to his body perfectly.

“What kind of business?” I ask. “Mafia stuff?”

He turns to face me, his expression unreadable. “Stuff you don’t need to be concerned with.”

That hits harder than I expect.

“Hey—where were you earlier?” I ask. “This morning, I mean. When I woke up.”

He stills.

“Am I being questioned?” he growls.

I lift a shoulder. “I mean, you always know where I am. It feels a little one-sided.”

He steps closer and cups my jaw in his hand. His thumb traces my cheekbone.

“It’s just mafia stuff,” he says, more gently this time. “Part of my life I don’t want to involve you in.”

“Why not?”

His eyes darken.

“Because you’re *good*,” he murmurs. “Too good for the darker parts of me.”

I stand there for a moment after he disappears out the bedroom and down the hall. Just as I’m about to follow, there’s the sound behind me of a text

coming in. I turn, looking toward the vanity to see Nico's phone.

It chimes again, a second text lighting up the screen.

Ignore it.

It's not your phone.

But then I frown.

He knows *every single facet* of my day, and gets all territorial about friends like Vaughn, and I don't know *anything* about all his little secrets?

"Part of my life I don't want to involve you in."

Translation: I get to have secrets and you don't.

The phone chimes again.

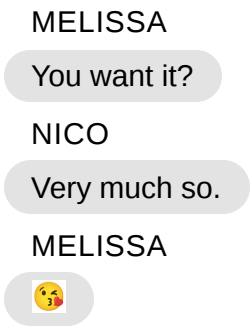
This time, I walk over. I tell myself I'm just getting it so I can bring it to him, in case it's something serious. But that's a hilarious lie.

I'm straight up *snooping*, is what I'm doing.

I hesitate before I pick it up.

I shouldn't look. Shouldn't care.

But I do, so I *do*. And *when* I do, I scowl at the name: *Melissa*.



My chest constricts.

Those are from ten minutes ago. The next texts are the three that just came now.

MELISSA

I love it! ❤️❤️ It's the PERFECT gift!

MELISSA

OMG you are the sweetest 😍😍

MELISSA

PS thank you for coming over earlier. You really know how to show a girl a good time.

My lungs seize up.

I stare at the screen, not breathing, not thinking, not even *feeling*—just frozen.

It all makes sense. The suit. The cologne. The vague non-answers. The secrecy.

Thank you for coming over earlier. You really know how to show a girl a good time.

I see *RED*.

"Because you're good. Too good for the darker parts of me."

Apparently, little miss *Melissa* lacks any annoying "goodness".

My fingers curl around the phone as a green, venomous beast snarls inside me.

The sound of footsteps has me jumping. And where the savage version of me would whirl and throw the phone at his head and demand answers, the *real* version of me quickly sets it down on the vanity and spins to make it look like I'm pawing through my clothes on the rack.

“*There* it is.”

Nico darts past me and grabs his phone. His scent—clean, masculine, a bit of leather—swirls around me as he twists me in his arms and leans down to kiss me.

I turn my head to the side, letting his lips only brush my cheek.

“I’ll be home late,” he murmurs. “Order something good, remember.”

I just nod as he turns and strides out of the room, a truly terrible idea curling like smoke inside my chest.

* * *

THE CAB PULLS AWAY before I can chicken out.

Alone at the top of the alley, I quickly scurry behind a dumpster, peering around it to see Nico disappearing through a nondescript steel door set into the concrete wall. No signage. No lights. Just a keypad.

Initially, I decide to wait a full thirty seconds before I move, but when I notice the door starting to swing shut, I change my mind and hustle.

I get to the door just in time, kicking an old coffee cup into the gap. It’s close, but the door doesn’t latch all the way as my pulse hammers in my chest.

Am I seriously doing this?

This is idiotic. It probably *is* a mafia thing, which would make following him immeasurably stupid. Or it’s a dumb poker game, and I’m going to look like a fool when I come barging in.

You’re going to drive yourself nuts wondering what it is until you see for yourself.

…Annnd there it is. That’s the voice that wins out.

The temperature drops the moment I’m inside: a cold draft curls around my legs like smoke. The walls are stone—old, rough-hewn, and I can feel the hallway sloping slightly downward.

For a moment, just before the door closes, I consider the fact that it’s pitch black in here. But just as I whirl back to the door, it clicks shut with heavy finality.

I fumble for my phone, but then the space illuminates automatically thanks to dim lights set into the floor, right by the walls.

My eyes widen as they adjust to the dimness. I’m in a stone hallway that looks like something out of a medieval castle, with carved pillars and recessed alcoves splattered with dried candle wax.

What the *hell*?

I walk quietly, careful not to let my heels echo. Far ahead, I hear the soft scuff of Nico’s shoes and I keep pace, hugging the side of the hallway as it rounds a curve.

Eventually, the corridor opens up slightly. Vaulted arches stretch overhead like ribs. It’s quiet, with the hum of something ancient.

Suddenly, I hear a door wrenching open on heavy hinges. I scurry forward, then flatten against the wall as I watch Nico slip through a heavy, intricately-carved wooden door. It closes behind him with a dull thud.

I jog forward and immediately try the handle.

Locked.

I press my ear to the wood. There’s nothing.

Shit.

Dead end.

Except—

I glance down the hallway, beyond the side door Nico just slipped through. It’s *not* a dead end. The passage continues, winding around the next bend.

And I can hear the soft, muffled sounds of *voices.*

I keep going.

The corridor narrows around me before it opens up again. The air becomes warmer, perfumed—incense, maybe.

Then the light shifts. A soft orange-gold glow filters through a series of archways ahead, flickering like flame.

When I step through the final arch, I stop breathing.

I’m standing in a cathedral.

Like, an *actual* cathedral.

Gothic arches stretch up into shadowed vaults overhead. Backlit stained glass windows glow along the walls. Pillars etched with vines and bones reach toward a ceiling traced in gold leaf.

A grand dais sits at the far end of the space with five high-backed thrones on it—black and gold, and empty.

But that’s not what steals my breath.

It’s the *people*.

There are dozens of them, maybe more. All masked. All elegant. All in varying stages of undress.

Some recline on velvet chaises. Others lounge on silk-draped couches. Bodies are tangled in corners, pressed against stone walls, stretched over carved benches. Couples, throuples, even one…whatever you call four people enjoying each other at the same time.

Skin glows in the candlelight. Hands roam. Mouths meet, and the space throbs with both softly feminine moans and deep, masculine groans.

What.

The.

Fuck.

I press myself into the shadows of the archway and just *watch*.

A woman in a gold Venetian-style mask straddles a man wearing a similar one. His hands grip her thighs as she rocks above him. A third masked figure—another man, I think?—kneels behind them, mouth pressed between their bodies.

I shouldn't be here. I *definitely* shouldn't be here.

What the fuck *is* this place? A freaking sex club?

Nico walked right in.

I grip the wall, bile bubbling up my throat. My chest tightens with a mix of betrayal and humiliation and *rage.*

Fuck him. If this is what he needed to sneak away for, to wrap himself in luxury and decadence and other people's bodies—maybe even this fucking Melissa bitch—then *fuck. Him.*

But I’m not leaving yet, not until I see more.

I double back quickly, ducking out of the cathedral and into the hallway before anyone notices me.

My chest heaves. My heart hammers. More than anything—more than the danger and the thrill and the sounds of sex behind me—I feel *exposed.*

I’m the only one without a mask. Not to mention, everyone out there was dressed in some blend of gorgeous formalwear and vaguely Ancient Greek or Roman attire. Meanwhile I’m still in my skirt and silk blouse, looking like I’m late for a business luncheon. If anyone looks at me for more than a few seconds, it’ll be glaringly obvious I don’t belong here.

I pass the door Nico went through earlier.

Still locked. But this time I realize there’s another door opposite it that I missed earlier, probably because I was distracted by the sounds of the people in the main space.

That door *does* open.

Woah.

It’s like a spa inside—or a sumptuous, elegant changing room. Gilded sconces glow on every wall. The air smells faintly of jasmine and honey, and tiled hallways lead to what look like showers, steam rooms, and who even knows what else.

Then I glance at the far wall, and my pulse skips.

It’s a rack of dresses and costumes, just like the women out there were wearing. Black silk. Gold embroidery. Leather straps and thin, glimmering chains. Above them, resting on elegant metal hooks, are the masks: plain, gold, vaguely Venetian.

I move slowly through the rack, fingers trailing over the dresses, the laced corsets and collar pieces. One in particular catches my eye—an *obscenely* skimpy little black number cut about a foot higher than anything I ever actually wear. It loops around the nape of the neck, tiny little straps holding barely-there pieces of black silk over the breasts, with a plunging—and I do mean *plunging*—neckline that delves so far down that I'm sure you would see my navel.

I don't think, I just grab it and slip behind a screen.

When I step out, I almost don't recognize myself. Not just because I'm wearing a mask.

My hair is loose. My shoulders bare. My body...transformed.

I look fucking *hot*.

Blushing, I grab a pair of strappy gold sandals and a thin gold sash that wraps around my hips.

I shouldn't be doing this.

Too late.

No one looks twice at me when I step back into the cathedral.

I'm just another person behind a mask now. Even if my heart is racing and pounding against my ribs.

Soft laughter and exquisite moans ripple through the space as I walk slowly, trying not to stare.

My face heats as I lay eyes on a muscled, tattooed man, groaning as he tangles his fingers in the dark hair of the woman on her knees in front of him. She's wearing only a see-through golden gauzy skirt, her hand busy between her thighs and her lips wrapped around the man's cock.

Another couple is on a velvet chaise, him holding one of her legs up as he rams into her from behind.

Holy fuck.

Every wall, every couch, every shadow holds some act of sin.

I keep walking, glancing around, simultaneously trying to spot Nico and dreading that I will.

Suddenly, I jump at the sound of a low bell tolling from somewhere high above.

Once. Twice. Three times.

The entire cathedral stills.

Voices cut off mid-laugh. Movements stop mid-thrust. Heads turn almost in unison toward the raised dais at the far end of the room, and the people that were fucking not three seconds ago stop and adjust their clothes, or get dressed.

A door opens behind the thrones.

My heart lurches into my throat as five figures step into the room.

Tall, built men, dressed in sleek, tailored black suits. But it’s the *masks* that make the breath still in my lungs.

A dog. A bull, with sharp, vicious horns. A bird of some kind, maybe a crow? A wolf. And finally, a stag with towering antlers.

They move like gods.

Kings.

Predators.

The crowd is all drifting forward, finding seats in chairs arranged in semicircular rows around a stone area in front of the dais. I join them, lingering at the back.

One of the masked gods—the dog—steps forward.

“The Black Court is now in session,” he growls in a deep, gravelly voice. He turns, nodding to two men dressed all in black with plain masks standing by a door.

“Bring out the accused.”

Yeah. I should not be here.

At. *All*.

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NAOMI

THE CATHEDRAL IS SILENT—A tense silence, like a held breath before a scream.

Everyone remains still, turned expectantly toward the dais as the five men in the animal masks take their seats, then silently nod to each other.

The whole vibe feels weirdly reverent, and not because we're in what might be an actual cathedral.

A side door creaks open, and a man is shoved forward by two masked guards.

He's Asian, maybe in his late forties. Slicked-back hair, broad shoulders, a long scar across his cheek, hands bound in front of him. He's not wearing a mask.

I glance around, my heart racing.

Where the *fuck* is Nico? And what the hell does he have to do with this shit?

The bound man sneers at the crowd, clearly trying to look annoyed by all this instead of scared. He's…not exactly selling it.

The man in the dog mask leans forward.

“Han Jiang,” he says. His gravel-thick voice sends a chill through the room.

Han scoffs. “Spare me the fucking theatrics.”

“You stand accused,” Dog Mask says calmly, ignoring the sneer, “of breaking a blood marker with Desmond Robinson, leader of the New York Jamaican Syndicate.”

“I merely exited a deal that no longer served me,” Han replies, unruffled. “Desmond can take it up with my people or go fuck himself. That’s *business*.”

A ripple moves through the masked crowd.

The man in the dog mask tilts his head. “Unfortunately, it’s not that simple, Han. We all know how a blood marker works. It is *the single* unbreakable currency of the underworld. Yet, you broke it.”

Han laughs. “I don’t give a shit. I do what’s best for me and mine, same as all you motherfuckers.”

The man in the crow or raven or whatever fucking bird it is mask stands, rolling his neck, cracking his tattooed knuckles.

Something about that moment freezes me, but I can’t identify what.

“Desmond’s cousin Jamal is dead,” Bird Mask says. “Killed when *your* people, under *your* direction, opened fire on Desmond’s.”

Han rolls his eyes. “I don’t know about you, but the underworld that *I* live and operate in is dangerous. Truces crumble. Arrangements change. It is what it is.”

Bird Mask shakes his head slowly. “Truces crumble, yes. But a truce cemented by a blood marker is an *unbreakable oath* by both parties. Again,

it is the *one* currency the underworld has that we all agree *cannot* and *will not* be broken."

"Oops," Han says sarcastically.

"You signed the contract," Bird Mask continues, an edge glinting in his tone. "You swore in *blood*. You chose to break it. And now, you're going to pay the price of that choice."

Wait.

Something inside of me ripples and jangles, like a warning bell in my head.

When it suddenly hits me, like a slap to the face, I can't breathe.

It took a while, because of the mask muffling it, but I *know* that voice.

The cadence. The tone. The dark power behind it. And it's then that the rest of the pieces suddenly fall into horrible place as the world tilts.

The tattooed hands and neck.

The suit jacket I watched him put on earlier.

The man in the bird mask is fucking *Nico*.

"It's time for judgment," Nico growls quietly. He turns to the man in the dog mask. "Hound?"

"Guilty," Dog Mask says easily.

"Guilty," Nico growls in a tone that makes my pulse race as it slithers down my back.

The man in the wolf mask nods. "Guilty," he says gleefully.

"Guilty," adds the man wearing the bull mask.

Stag Mask nods. “Guilty,” he murmurs in a slightly creepy, almost ethereal tone.

The man Nico called Hound turns to Han, voice steady.

“You have been adjudicated.”

Finally, the smirk drops from the man’s face. “Wait. On what fucking authority?”

“This court’s authority,” Nico says grimly.

“No, fuck that!” Han barks. “Fuck you and fuck *this*! Get me on the phone with Desmond. We can figure this out man to man—”

“Fight or flight?”

Han blinks, tripping over his words as Nico sits and the man in the wolf mask stands, leering down at him from the dais.

“W-what?”

“I said, *fight…*” the wolf growls, his tone full of malice, turning and gesturing to a low table draped in black velvet and covered in weapons.

Blades. Baseball bats. Axes. Chains. Hammers.

What the fuck.

“Or *flight*,” the wolf finishes. He gestures past the crowd with his other hand to a stone archway that appears to lead down a hallway lit only by low candlelight.

The color drains from Han’s face. “Get… Get Desmond,” he chokes. “Whatever he wants to make this right—”

“We’re well past that,” the bull grunts.

“You know the rules,” the wolf says, his voice light—playful, even. “It’s not complicated. Run, or bleed.”

Han glances at the table. Then he turns, looking to the archway.

“What the fuck's in there?”

“A way out,” the wolf purrs seductively. “Maybe,” he amends.

Han swallows, shaking his head. “I-I’m not going in there.”

“Then you fight!” the wolf says gleefully. “Choose your weapon.”

Han stares at the table as a guard walks over and cuts his wrists free. He takes a shaky breath, his face grim. “Fuck it,” he mutters. “Knives.”

The wolf steps down from the dais, tilting his head slightly. Psychotic. Predatory.

“I was *hoping* you’d say that.”

A guard hands Han a huge, gleaming hunting knife, then offers its twin to the wolf.

My mouth feels dry. My nerves are jangling as I struggle to breathe.

What the HELL is this.

I want to turn and scream at Nico, tell him it’s me and that I’m freaking the fuck out. But I’m frozen in place, watching the two men with knives circle each other.

When it happens, it happens quickly.

Brutally.

The wolf doesn’t fight like a man. It’s like watching a wild beast: fluid and unmerciful. He lets Han get in one good swing before he surprises him with

a swift kick to the shin. I and many others in the crowd gasp sharply when Han's leg jerks unnaturally to the side with a loud snapping sound.

Jesus Christ.

Han screams as the wolf rakes the tip of his blade up his forearm, opening the skin and splattering blood across the stone beneath their feet. Han's knife clatters to the ground as he falls to his knees.

The wolf doesn't let up: he wraps his arm around Han's neck from behind and drags him screaming across the floor, forcing him to face the crowd as they come to a stop right in front of us.

This is madness.

Sheer, savage lunacy.

I feel like I'm in some apocalyptic movie, watching warlord justice as the wolf jerks his arm, forcing Han's head back and exposing his throat.

He brings the knife to Han's neck.

I rip my eyes away, but not fast enough to avoid seeing the blade slice across Han's throat in one clean arc.

Oh God…

Blood sprays out in a flood, the crowd gasping and screaming—some in horror, others in rapt, orgiastic voyeurism.

I stumble back, my entire body trembling.

Nico sits—masked, unmoving and silent—as the body drops to the ground.

This is what he's part of.

What he's been keeping from me.

My legs start moving on their own accord.

I slip away from the crowd, melting back into the shadows near the stone archway carved with runes that leads to the flickering hallway.

The man in the wolf mask called it “a way out.”

It’d better be.

No one sees me slip out. I stumble down the hall, still looking over my shoulder at the gothic cathedral scene. Then I turn, and I *run*.

My heels are loud against the stone, but I don’t care. I keep running, my breath shallow and frantic until I suddenly hit a wall. The hallway branches left and right.

Oh, fuck.

This isn’t an exit.

It’s a maze.

But I can’t go back to the carnage in the cathedral. So I blindly choose left, and bolt that way. Then right. Then another right, followed by a left.

Panic begins to claw at me.

Every turn looks identical—arched ceilings, flickering light, stone walls that feel like they're pressing in closer with each corner I round.

The air is colder here. Drier.

I stop and slowly spin in a circle, vainly trying to remember which way I came, fear roaring through my system.

Suddenly, my spine snaps straight and my skin prickles.

Footsteps.

I whirl in their direction, tuning my ears before panic suddenly bursts through me.

No, not footsteps.

Someone *running*.

Fast. Coming closer.

Oh, God.

I start to run again, twisting left, right, down another hall, then another left—

I slam against a wall.

Dead end.

I whirl around to run in the other direction—

And *scream* when a shadow lunges from the dark.

A body slams into me, hard, ripping off my mask and whipping me around, slamming me face-first into the wall, pressing hard against my back.

A hand wraps around my throat, sending adrenaline exploding like napalm through my body.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” a voice growls.

My breath stutters.

I freeze.

It’s Nico.

His hand is still on my throat, not squeezing, just *holding*. Like he doesn’t trust me not to disappear, or trust himself to let me go.

“What the fuck are you doing here,” he growls again, his voice even more edged and deeper.

“I—” My voice breaks. “I saw—”

“*Everything*?” he finishes for me.

I nod.

His hard body clenches with rage behind me.

With *hunger*.

And then—I feel it.

The sharp press of him, thick and growing, hardening against the curve of my ass through his slacks.

My breath stutters, and my traitor body sparks to life.

Knowing him. Needing him.

Being so fucking familiar with him that it craves him as he pulls nearer.

Unraveling me from the inside out.

Except just as that feeling ignites inside of me, something darker, something *angry*, roars up to snuff it out with a black cloud.

“Don’t you fucking touch me.”

The words hiss through my clenched teeth as I tense against him. I shove back, as if trying to dislodge his weight as it pins me to the wall. But he doesn’t move or even budge one inch. His hand stays tight on my throat, the other slamming into the wall beside my head.

“I *said*,” I choke, writhing under his grip. “Do *not* put your hands on me!”

There’s a pause. A throbbing, vibrating silence.

“*Excuse me—*”

“You got dressed up tonight,” I snap, still facing the wall with his hand around my throat and the achingly familiar heat of his body pressing into me. “You smelled like *cologne.*”

“I *told you*,” he snarls. “I had a work thing—”

“Or was it a *Melissa* thing?” I blurt furiously. “Or maybe some other side girl?!”

Nico goes still. But then, the short, dark laugh that rips out of him almost makes me scream in rage.

“You think I got dressed up to go *fuck* someone else?”

I push back against him, shoving off the wall, but his hand slams against the stone beside my head, caging me in.

“I fucking *saw* your phone,” I snap. “Don’t act like I’m making shit—”

“*This*,” he snarls, and I flinch as his muscles coil tightly and furiously against me. “*This* is what I was talking to Melissa about,” he snaps angrily, yanking his phone out of his pocket with his free hand and shoving it in my face.

The screen glows brightly in the dim, low light of the stone hallway he’s got me pinned to the wall of. But as my eyes adjust to the glow, the image I’m looking at clears.

Worn, ancient-looking pale satin pointe shoes encased in a velvet-lined display box, with a title above it almost like an eBay listing that reads:

Pierina Legnani’s Odette/Odile slippers – 1895 Imperial Ballet – Petipa/Ivanov

My brain stutters.

Pierina Legnani was an Italian ballerina who is *still* thought of as one of the greatest of all time. She played the dual Odette-Odile role in the infamous Imperial Ballet production of the newly revised *Swan Lake* in 1895, choreographed by two of the greatest choreographers ever, Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov.

“I—*what*?” I stammer.

“Melissa is a retired dance teacher, and now works as a broker for rare ballet antiquities,” he growls. “She taught Bianca when she was five. She’s almost *eighty*, for what that’s worth.”

My pulse roars in my ears. I don’t say anything. It’s like I *can’t* say anything.

“Since you were snooping,” Nico rasps in my ear. “You probably already know that I went to see her. That she thinks I’m the *sweetest*. That she *loves* the gift…”

I shiver as his snarled breath traces like a blade over my jugular.

“The ballet slippers,” he growls tightly. “That I bought *for you*, by the way.”

I go still. Time seems to stutter for a moment.

“*Surprise*,” he mutters dryly.

Holy…

WHAT.

His face moves closer to mine, his voice a lethal whisper now.

“You think I could even *look* at another woman, when you exist?”

My breath catches again.

My heart flips.

Because I want to scream. I want to apologize. I want to throw myself into his arms.

But then his tone changes.

Darkens.

Flares into something else entirely.

He presses harder into me, pinning my hips to the wall, his breath hot and sharp in my ear.

“I told you this part of my life wasn’t for you,” he growls, his voice like a razor dragged across velvet. He presses harder on my back and pins me to the wall with his firm body. “You’re too *good* for this,” he rasps.

I gasp when his hand pushes up under the hem of my stolen dress.

“*I—I’m not*,” I whimper in a broken whisper.

“No,” he breathes, voice guttural. “Not anymore, you’re not.”

His fingers hook into the lace of my underwear and tears it down to my knees. I moan when he shoves my thighs apart, stretching my panties tight around them as he forces his hand between my legs.

“*Bad fucking girl*.”

I’m already embarrassingly wet—confusingly so, given what I’ve just seen and experienced. But it’s like my brain has short-circuited. Like I’ve

become as broken, fucked up, and deranged as whatever it is I just witnessed.

Try as I might, I *cannot* make myself be scared, or horrified, or numb.

My palms flatten against the cool stone wall, my back arching before I can stop myself.

Nico unzips roughly. The sound makes me whimper.

Then, without any warning, he grips my hips and rams every fat, swollen inch of his huge cock into me from behind.

Hard.

I cry out, my forehead hitting the wall, and he stills, buried to the hilt.

“Is this what you wanted?” he snarls. “To see what I am? To be *part* of it?”

My answer is a moan.

A sob.

A scream that only he hears.

He pounds into me, ruthless, raw, *consuming*. My legs tremble. My fingers scrape across the stone, seeking some purchase.

“*Fuck*, baby. Your cunt feels even tighter after you’ve run from me. *Stretch* for me, baby. Let that pussy squeeze and strangle me like a good little cock slut.”

My jaw goes slack, my head swimming as my vision blurs. I pant against the wall, clinging to the rough stone as Nico fucks me like an *animal*—hard, rough, unmerciful. He reaches up and rips my dress half off, tearing the straps and letting them fall down. My nipples tighten, and I cry out as they press to the hard stone. His hands maul me, pinching and rolling my

nipples as his cock rams into me over and over, sending me into an abyss as everything starts to tighten up.

"Listen to that—so wet for me, so greedy. You're going to come all over my cock already, aren't you, baby?" I shudder, whimpering eagerly as he bites my earlobe hard. "*You're gonna make a mess of my big fucking dick*, aren't you?"

He's not wrong.

I *am* going to come already.

It's all of it: the sheer madness of everything I've witnessed, the roughness in his touch and thrusts, the vicious way he's *claiming* me against the wall, pounding into me hard and fast in a way that ignites unhinged wildness in me.

With a cry, my back arches sharply, my legs spasming and my body wrenching in pleasure. Nico holds me tight, pinning me hard to the wall, never slowing his powerful, deep thrusts…and I feel myself shatter around him.

Moans fill my ears—his and mine together—as the orgasm explodes through me.

Nico slows briefly as I suck in breaths of air. Then he slides his thick cock out of me, leaving me feeling empty.

"I don't think bad little girls who break the rules get off that easily," he murmurs darkly. "*So to speak*."

His hands grip my ass, fingers digging into the flesh. He starts to spread my cheeks, and when I feel the slick, swollen head of his cock drag up from my pussy, my eyes fly open.

“*Nico*—!” I gasp.

“You’re going to take me *here* now. Just like this. Up against the fucking wall like the dirty little cock tease that you are.”

My eyes bulge, my mouth going slack. I hear him spit—fucking *spit*—and then feel it drip down my ass, where he smears it against my back hole with his dick.

It should be fucking degrading, using his *spit* as lube to take my ass for the first time. It should feel demeaning and cheap.

Maybe it does.

So why are my legs shaking in anticipation? Why is my body quivering, nipples tight against the wall, with a fresh wave of slickness coating my thighs?

“You’re going to take my cock in your ass like a good girl, Naomi.”

My spine snaps rigid as I feel him rub his slick cock up and down, sliding the head over the impossibly tight ring of my ass.

It’s never going to fit.

He’s too big.

I’ve never done this before.

I’ve never even *wanted* to before. But right now, up against the wall, waiting for him to take this last part of me, I’m riding a high—and the sheer adrenaline and anticipation of something so raw and wrong and *dirty* has me aching for it.

He pushes. The pressure builds against my tight hole, and it takes me a second to realize that the whining sound in my ears is *me*.

Craving it.

Desperate for it.

Needing it in a brutal, dark way I can't explain.

"*Fuck me…*" I choke as Nico's thick cock eases against my little hole.

He groans behind me and spits on my ass again. I shiver, whimpering as I feel his fat cock spread the slickness over my asshole and then start to press in again.

"Fuck you *how*," he snarls.

"*Rough,*" I blubber, nails dragging down the wall.

"*Where*."

Oh, God.

"*My ass…*" I whisper, my breath catching as he starts to push in, adding more pressure. "*Fuck me hard in the ass…*"

Suddenly, his head pops past my ring.

I cry out, my jaw clenching, my face caving as pain and pleasure surge brutally through me.

He feels fucking *huge*, like he's stretching me past my limits, like he's going to split me in half.

"Nico—"

"That's it, baby," he groans, leaning down and biting my shoulder sharply, making me gasp. "Just relax, and take my cock in your ass like a good girl."

He slides in a little more, and my eyes roll back as red and black mist clouds my reality.

It’s so good.

It hurts.

I want more.

Nico pushes his fat cock deeper.

It’s pain, and heat, and a fullness I’ve never even imagined.

I can’t breathe from the sheer force of him claiming every inch of me.

He thrusts deeper, and I scream, muffled by his hand. Deeper, deeper deeper…his cock feels endless as he crams every inch up my ass until suddenly, my eyes fly wide and my mouth drops open as I feel his heavy balls against my pussy.

Holy. Fuck.

It burns. It aches. It breaks something in me.

But it’s not pain that brings me close to tears. It’s the way he *groans*—low, triumphant, like he’s finally home.

His mouth brushes my ear. “You feel that?” he growls. “That’s me taking the last of you.”

My knees shake. My nails scrape the wall. He slowly drags his thick cock out of me, my ass clenching tight around him. Then, with just the head inside, he starts to work it right back in, wrenching a low, guttural moan from my throat.

Suddenly, the pain begins to melt just enough to make room for something else, dark and obscene and electric.

Pleasure.

My hips push back a little.

His hand slides from my mouth to my throat.

“You’re taking my cock in your ass like such a good girl, Naomi,” he groans. “You’re going to feel me here for days, ballerina. You’re going to remember how fucking *mine* you are with every step. This slutty little fuck-hole’s been waiting for me to take it, hasn’t it?”

I’m drowning in a mix of pleasure and pain that’s taking me places I’ve never been before.

I can’t speak, can barely breathe.

Most of all, I just want *more*.

Nico is happy to oblige. He fucks me like he means it. I moan his name and cry out for more. He grips my hips, pounding harder, faster, deeper, until my body shakes and wrenches.

I’m going to come.

I’m going to come with his cock in my ass.

“Look at you, baby. Such a dirty little anal slut. You’re going to come like this, aren’t you? Greedy little thing, squeezing my cock with that back hole, making your pussy jealous.”

His thrusts grow rougher. His breath turns ragged.

My whole reality shifts and blurs.

“That’s my good girl,” Nico snarls into my ear as he buries his cock deep inside my ass. “Taking it so good. Taking it like *a such a fucking good girl*.”

It’s like pulling a trigger. The second the words leave his lips and purr into my ears, my whole body writhes and shatters.

The scream that rips from my throat is both unholy communion and sweetest deliverance. My entire body spasms, my nails clawing against the stone as the orgasm explodes through my core.

Wave after wave crashes into me as I hear Nico groan. He grabs my hip hard with one hand and wraps a hank of my hair around the other as he buries himself balls-deep in me, muscles clenched hard at my back.

And then he pumps his hot cum into my ass, growling against my skin, both of us collapsing to the stone wall.

He doesn’t let go. Just holds me there, arms wrapped around my chest, his breath warm against my neck.

When he finally moves, he turns me gently, pressing his forehead to mine.

Then he kisses me, hard and fierce.

Like he’s sealing something.

“*Mine*,” he murmurs.

And I think, somewhere in this madness we’ve wrapped ourselves in…

He’s mine, too.

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NICO

KRATOS STANDS near the window of Carmine's office in the home we grew up in, looking like he's one wrong answer away from shoving someone through it.

That's not a figure of speech. His knuckles are still scabbed and bruised from the last "lead" he got regarding what almost happened to Bianca.

Carmine sits at his desk, rubbing his jaw with one hand and drumming the fingers of the other on the wood. I'm leaning against the edge of that same desk, silent, jaw tight.

We're about to meet with a very promising lead about the car bomb. Angelo, the owner of the shop that did most of the restoration on the Chevelle, is a good guy. He's old-school Italian from the Lower East Side and has known our family for years. Hell, it's one of the reasons we went to him for the resto-job. He and Vito go way back, and he was *psyched* to work on the project for Dad's birthday.

We've obviously already done our due diligence on the shop itself. Angelo's loyalty to our family is iron-clad, but he himself insisted, just in case.

We never found anything, but earlier today he reached out to Kratos and said something might have turned up. And since we have no idea how far

the Obsidian's Syndicate's reach is, we opted for a face-to-face meeting here at the house, not one over the phone.

There's a knock at the door, interrupting my thoughts. John, one of our guards, steps in.

"Mr. Barone." He dips his head to Carmine, almost like a bow. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Angelo's here."

Carmine nods. "Send him in."

We all stand as Angelo Russo walks in, looking a little nervous. Carmine shakes his hand firmly, followed by me and then Kratos.

Carmine gestures to the seat across from him. Angelo clears his throat as he sits. "Thanks for seeing me," he says. "It's about one of my guys."

Kratos' jaw grinds.

"You all know I always vet my crew," Angelo says. "I've worked with most of these guys for years—their fathers, too, some of them, back in the day. You've been in my shop—"

"No one's questioning you, Angelo," Carmine says quietly.

The mechanic nods, jaw tight. "But I've got this new guy, only been with me a year or so. Eddie. Quiet, keeps his head down, always just scraping by, you know? He looks down. "But lately, Eddie's started getting flashy."

I frown. "Flashy?"

"New clothes, new phone. Buying the whole garage lunch." Angelo sighs. "The other day, I saw his mother driving a brand-new Range Rover. She claims it's from a cousin, but…" He shrugs. "My gut says something stinks."

Kratos growls low in his throat. “And you think he was involved in the bomb.”

Angelo was understandably pretty shaken after the bombing. He and Dad go far back enough that he’s known Bianca since she was a kid. Also, whoever rigged up that explosive did so while the car was under Eddie’s own roof.

He frowns. “I don’t know. I hope I’m wrong—truly. But I’m old enough to know that when you smell smoke, there’s usually fire, you know?”

Carmine’s eyes go cold. “You okay with what this might mean for him if he’s involved?”

Angelo’s face hardens. “I got nothing but respect for your family. Your father. Loyalty means a lot to him, and to me.” His eyes darken. “So does *disloyalty.*”

“Where is Eddie now?” I ask.

Angelo exhales. “Maybe a strip club called Fantasy over in Queens. He goes there a lot on his days off.”

Kratos is already moving for the door. I start to follow, and Carmine stands. When he does, I turn and shake my head.

“The king doesn’t do this kind of work,” I growl quietly.

His mouth twists sourly. I can see the darkness in him that lusts for violence and darkness surging up. But then he wrestles it back down.

He knows I’m right.

“Tell me what you find out,” he growls.

* * *

FANTASY IS EXACTLY what you'd imagine: grimy neon lights, loud, shitty music through shittier speakers, overpriced drinks, and desperation dressed in glitter.

The place smells like shame and cum.

Kratos and I step through the front door, eyeing the place. There are two dancers on stage, a few lonely-looking regulars at the bar, and *lots* of purple neon.

And for fuck's sake, that jizz smell is *everywhere*.

One of the girls working the floor spots us and immediately strides over like a shark smelling blood in the water: tall, leggy, all fake lashes and tits. She smacks her chewing gum as she stops in front of us, trying to look coy and seductive.

"We're not here for a dance," I say before she can even open her mouth.

Kratos steps forward. "We're looking for a guy named Eddie. Heard he might be here."

Her eyes dart between us. The "seductive" look drops and is immediately replaced by a far more genuine one of nervousness.

"We're not here to cause trouble for you or any of the girls," I say. "Just Eddie. Do you know him?"

I slide her three hundred from my wallet. She folds the cash up and slips it into her skimpy top, still cracking her gum.

"Yeah, I know him."

"Don't suppose he's here now?" Kratos rumbles.

She nods, pointing across the club to a hallway.

“He’s in one of the private rooms. Number…four.” She hesitates again. “You gonna hurt him?”

“That a problem?” Kratos growls.

Her head shakes vigorously. “He’s been throwing a lot more cash around than usual these days. But he’s still a total piece of shit to the girls. Not a fan of the word *no*, if you get what I mean.”

“*Loud and fucking clear*,” Kratos rumbles, cracking his knuckles.

The hallway is narrow and lit with that same purple neon.

Same jizz scent, too.

I mean, *fuck*.

We pass two other private rooms before Kratos shoulders open the door to number four without knocking.

Eddie is mid-laugh, sprawled on a shabby velvet couch with a drink in each hand and two dancers draped over him.

He pales the second he sees us. The girls bolt. One doesn’t even grab her heels.

“Woah!” he blurts. “Fellas, this is a private party—”

He chokes as Kratos grabs him by the shirt and slams him back against the couch, spilling his drinks all over him.

“Dude, what the *fuck* is your—”

“Know who I am?” Kratos hisses.

Eddie scowls. “I’m gonna go with…*no*?”

“I’m the guy whose wife you almost blew up with that Chevelle.”

The color drains from Eddie's face so fast you'd swear he'd just been shot through the neck.

"*Oh fuck*," he wheezes, his breath suddenly coming in short, ragged bursts. "Look, man, I didn't know, okay?!"

Kratos' massive fist slams into Eddie so hard that his head snaps to the side, blood spraying across the couch and wall.

"My *wife*," Kratos seethes. He aims for Eddie's mouth this time, splitting a lip and knocking out a tooth as the guy screams, tumbling back on the couch.

"I just wired it!!" Eddie bleats. "I didn't know what they were gonna *do* with it! I didn't know it was gonna be used on a *woman*!"

Oh, Eddie.

You stupid, *stupid* motherfucker.

I'm mad. Beyond mad, actually. I mean, we're talking about my fucking sister.

But Kratos looks like the Devil himself, risen from Hell.

"You *planted* the fucking bomb?!" he roars. Eddie screams and gurgles blood as Kratos starts to lay into him, smashing him in the face, cracking a rib or two, then picking Eddie up by the throat and hurling him across the room.

"It wasn't *me!*" Eddie sobs, crumpled against the wall. "I mean—yeah, I did it, but the order came from the Obsidian Syndicate! I was just following instructions!"

Kratos rears back for another hit—

“Th-they’ve got ways of keeping people in line!” Eddie blurts.

Kratos freezes for half a second.

Eddie seizes it. “Drugs! Blackmail! Sex tapes! Like that thing with the politician!”

Kratos isn’t even listening anymore. He just wants to *break* something. He looks like he’s about to hit Eddie so hard that he literally knocks his head off, when I stop him with a hand on his shoulder.

Kratos whirls with a snarl, a wild animal surprised while about to make a kill.

“Give me a minute. Just *one*,” I growl. “Then he’s all yours.”

He reluctantly steps back.

“One minute,” he snaps.

Eddie’s sobbing when the door shuts behind Kratos. His mouth is gushing blood, and one of his eyes is already starting to swell shut.

I step forward slowly, kneeling in front of him.

“You’ve got sixty seconds,” I say. “What the fuck were you just saying? About a politician and a sex tape?”

He whispers. “*Please*—”

“I’ll kill you myself right now if you don’t start talking.”

He nods quickly. “Okay! Okay! So, there was this politician, and he was trying to get out of a deal he made with the Obsidian Syndicate or something. Well, the Syndicate…” He shivers. “They don’t fuck around, man. And they wanted to get this guy in line.” He swallows. “So they filmed—”

“*A porn*,” I snarl out viciously. “Yes, I’m aware.”

Rage erupts inside me along with something green and venomous, cold and brutal in its need for blood.

It’s the same feeling I’ve felt every single fucking time I’ve thought about that goddamn video.

Naomi and two men—fucking them. Sucking them off. Being touched *by* them.

I see pure red, my hands curling to fists so tightly that my forearms bulge.

“A porn?” Eddie makes a confused face. “I wouldn’t exactly call it that, man, unless you’re into some seriously sick shit.”

My eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

“That girl they filmed? The politician’s daughter?” He wrinkles his nose. “She was all drugged up when they raped or…whatever. I haven’t seen it.”

I go utterly still, so much that I swear my heart stops beating for a second.

“From what I heard,” Eddie continues, “they were gonna send it to that politician. Like, leverage or whatever. But I think it got destroyed when one of their buildings got raided or something.”

My eyes slowly pull to slits.

“What the fuck did you just say?” I rasp.

“One of the buildings they operate out of got raided or—”

“Before that,” I snarl. “About the girl.”

He makes a face. “Oh, dude, that was fucked. They drugged this bitch up and raped her or something.”

The world stops turning as something vicious, cold and jagged rips into my chest.

Holy fucking hell.

That fucking tape isn't a goddamn *porn*.

It's her getting *raped*. Assaulted.

And I held it over her head.

I'm numb as I turn for the door.

"Please, man!" Eddie sobs. He lunges for me, still on his knees, grabbing the cuff of my jacket sleeve. "That big guy out there, the husband of the girl from the car bomb… He's gonna fuckin' kill me!"

I look him dead in the eye.

"And I'm her fucking brother. Think about how badly *I* want you dead," I whisper.

Then I open the door.

"Do whatever you want," I growl to Kratos.

He smiles darkly as he cracks his knuckles and steps back into the room.

The weight in my chest as I walk out of the back hallway and onto the main club floor isn't fury—it's something worse.

Guilt.

This whole thing with Naomi started with me thinking she'd done something bad or stupid, and I was going to hold her to the fire for it to get what I wanted.

I used it to manipulate her. Made her feel dirty about it.

And finding out that that thing was in fact a *fucking video of her own assault* is…

Horrifying.

Monstrous.

A knife to my heart that I want to rip out and then drive right back in again.

I'm walking blindly back to the front door, my entire body numb, when something catches my eye. I frown when I see the guy standing by the bar, talking to one of the strippers and passing her a wad of cash.

Vaughn.

What the fuck is that asshole doing here?

"Vaughn," I call out.

He doesn't acknowledge me. He just stops talking to the girl in the stilettos and bikini and slowly turns his back to me.

"Vaughn," I say again, louder.

His shoulders tense.

Then, he bolts.

I'm frozen for a second, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on as he runs through the club and down the hallway where I left Eddie and Kratos.

I mean, it's strange enough that he's here right now, and not at rehearsal. But why the fuck is he being so weird?

I give chase, bolting back down the hallway myself.

The door at the far end of it is swinging shut by the time I slam into it. I tumble out of the back of the strip club and into an alley just in time to see

Vaughn dodging traffic as he crosses a busy street, then jump behind the wheel of a black pickup and roar off.

I come a skidding stop at the curb, panting as I watch the truck's taillights fade.

I don't know what the hell I just saw. But fuck it.

I know where I need to go next.

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NICO

I DON'T GO HOME RIGHT AWAY. I can't face what I know I have to do there, not yet.

Besides, right now, all I want to see is her.

The auditorium is dim, the house lights down as I slip in through a side door and keep to the shadows. The stage glows in gold and lavender, warm light illuminating the dancers as they rehearse with slow, controlled grace.

When I see her, my heart both soars and breaks.

Naomi's front and center on stage, Odette in her sorrow following her betrayal by the Prince. Her spine arches, her arms tremble, every movement carved from emotion so deep it wouldn't even need music.

My chest cracks open. She has no idea what I've just learned.

But I push that aside and just watch the sheer beauty and talent of her on that stage. The precise movements. The delicate grace.

The seemingly effortless way she turns into this…*ethereal being* on stage, an utterly captivating, magical creature that dances only for me in this moment.

The music switches, and another figure springs onto the stage with equally elegant, masterful steps.

It's *Vaughn.*

He enters from stage left with a dramatic leap, dressed in plain rehearsal blacks, moving with feline ease.

I blink, my brow furrowing.

What the *fuck*?

I just saw him fifteen minutes ago in *Queens.* I had to break about a dozen traffic law to get here, and yet he’s up there dancing?

I stare at him, pulse starting to escalate. But when the music shifts again, and Naomi slips back to center stage, I shake it off and just watch her.

I could watch her forever.

After a while, though, I know I have to go.

Time to face my own music.

* * *

WHEN I GET HOME I walk straight to the desk in my office, yank open the drawer, and pull out the thumb drive.

I’ve avoided it like poison for weeks. I’ve tried not even to think about it, because the idea of this woman with anyone else drives me into a jealous, vicious rage unlike any I’ve ever known.

Leverage, I called it.

Collateral.

I shoved it in her face and told myself that whatever was on it didn't matter. That she'd made her choices, and now those choices were a weapon for me to use against her.

I pour myself a heavy drink, slug back half of it, then take a seat at the desk. My hands shake as I plug the drive into the laptop. The folder pops up.

I double-click the file named "Naomi".

The very first part I've already seen, the night I got it from Mario.

Naomi's lying on a bed in a tutu and tights. Two men climb onto it with her, chuckling. Her eyes open, a faraway, sloppy smile on her face.

My heart drops.

The first time I saw this, I thought she was drunk.

Now I know she was drugged.

"Ready to have a good time, Naomi?" the older of the two men chuckles.

"Yeaaaah…." Naomi sighs, her eyes closing.

They pull her practice tutu down and off. Then her leotard. Then her tights.

"Fuck, man. You want to go first or me?"

"Remember what the boss said. No fucking," the older guy grunts as they both take their dicks out.

"Such bullshit," the younger guy sighs sadly.

My fist crashes onto the desk as he starts to stroke her thigh.

"Orders are orders," the older guy mutters, stroking his pathetic, limp dick. "This one's a virgin, so no fuckin' her, okay?"

My heart twists painfully as I stare haggardly at the screen.

Yes, she was a virgin.

And I took that.

Roughly. Callously. Without a shred of tenderness.

What the fuck is wrong with me.

“How about her mouth?”

“Tempting,” the older guy groans. “But we can’t. You can do whatever else you want, though.”

“Fuck, yeah,” the other guy grins. “What a hot body.”

He gropes her tits. The other one jams his hand between her thighs.

I want to douse the world in kerosene and light it on fire.

I want to maim.

Destroy.

Kill.

But I force myself to watch every horrible second. To fight back the vomit that threatens to erupt from my stomach.

By the time I close the laptop, I can’t even see straight.

I used this. Held it over her head. Threatened her with her own fucking trauma.

And all she ever did was survive it, and *try to forget it.*

I bury my face in my hands, rage and shame snaking around each other until I can’t tell where one ends and the other begins.

What the fuck have I done.

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NAOMI

THE APARTMENT IS dark when I step inside.

The city glows faintly through the floor-to-ceiling windows, bathing everything in a silver-blue haze. The lights are off. No sound. No movement.

“Nico?” I call out softly.

No answer.

I kick off my shoes and start to walk deeper into the apartment.

Then I see him, sitting utterly still in a chair in the living room—hands clasped between his knees, head bowed, staring at the floor.

“Nico?”

He doesn’t look up.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my pulse quickening and my voice echoing in the quiet.

He stands slowly, his eyes not meeting mine. Suddenly, he drops to one knee.

Woah.

For half a second, my brain actually thinks he's going to fucking *propose*.

My lips part. My breath stops. But then he lifts his face to mine, and I realize I'm wrong.

His eyes are haggard. His jaw is tight. His entire body is stiff with tension, and his strong, deep voice cracks when he speaks.

"*Please forgive me*."

I stare at him, confused. He's still on one knee.

Not moving, not blinking, like even *breathing* is painful.

"Nico…" I whisper. "What—what are you talking about?"

His hand lifts slightly, reaching for mine. Then it drops again, like he doesn't want to touch me.

Like he *can't*.

"I didn't know," he chokes out. "*Fuck*, Naomi. I thought…"

He trails off, shaking his head like he's trying to dislodge something from his brain.

I take a step back. Pain flickers across his face.

"*Please*," he rasps. "Please. Just—fucking *say* something. Scream at me. Fucking *hit* me."

"Nico," I say again, more slowly. "I don't understand what you're apologizing for."

He drags a trembling hand through his hair.

“I watched the video,” he finally says hoarsely. “The one of…*you*.”

The words hit like a gunshot. The floor turns liquid. I feel like I’ve stepped into thin air, and I don’t know where the ground is anymore.

“You…” My voice cracks.

“For the first time,” he adds, choking.

Something inside me winces, like I’ve been punched.

“You…you *just* watched it now?”

“I watched the first part before—just the very beginning. But I couldn’t—I couldn’t go further. I thought I knew what it was. I thought it was…”

Suddenly, I feel nauseous.

Shattered.

Cold.

“You never watched it before.”

My voice reminds me of crumpled crepe paper as it rattles dryly from my throat.

Nico’s eyes lance into mine, a haunted, broken darkness in them.

“You…” I slowly shake my head from side to side, my pulse thudding. “You thought I’d made a fucking *porn*,” I rasp, staring at him. “You *blackmailed* me with it. *Threatened* me with it.”

His face twists.

“I didn’t know,” he says again, softer now.

“You didn’t *want* to know,” I snap.

It comes out more sharply than I meant it to, but I don’t take it back.

Because it’s *true.*

Something in me breaks and shatters.

It’s just now hitting me that the entire basis for *all of this*—for all our twisted power games—was predicated on an idea he had of me in his head.

That I was a cheap whore who made porn.

“You thought I was a slut,” I whisper, and my voice wavers.

Not with grief. With rage.

“That’s why you thought you could control me. Why you dragged me into this twisted, *fucked-up* thing with you! You thought I’d already belonged to someone else, so…what?” I bark. “That meant I’d be easy to own?!”

His jaw sets. “Naomi, I didn’t—”

“You figured I was *used,* so I’d let *you* use me too?”

“Nao—”

“*Fuck you*!” I scream, my whole body shaking as I gasp for air. “FUCK. *YOU*!”

He takes a step toward me.

I take one back.

“You didn’t dominate me because you *saw something* in me,” I say, my voice cracking. “You thought I was something I’m not. You saw *easy fucking prey*. You saw a fucking *pawn* to toy with!”

His face crumples.

And still, I don’t stop.

“I gave you pieces of me I didn’t even know I *had*,” I seethe. “I told you things I never told *anyone*. I thought—” I choke. “I thought you fucking SAW ME!”

He moves, as if to take me in his arms. Tell me it’s going to be okay. Kiss me until I believe it. But I put out a hand, stopping him cold.

“*Don’t*.”

His arms fall to his sides.

The man who once looked like he could destroy the world and feel nothing now looks destroyed himself.

“All that submission,” I say quietly, shaking my head and backing away. “All that power you thought you had over me wasn’t real. This *toxic* fucking power imbalance was based on *bullshit*!”

My whole body begins to shudder, my vision swimming as I back away from him, my heart breaking.

“You held *my own assault* over my head and used it to turn me into your little plaything!” I scream.

He flinches like I hit him.

“*Naomi—*”

I bark out a cold laugh as I whirl away from him and storm to the door.

“*Dammit*, Naomi!”

I hear him start after me. But before he can reach me I bolt, heading for his jacket by the door, jamming my hand behind it and wrapping my fingers around the cold metal of the gun he keeps in a shoulder holster there.

He stops cold when I whirl on him, gun raised.

“*Baby*—”

“Do *not* fucking call me that!” I snarl.

His eyes capture mine, still fierce and throbbing with dark energy even as I keep him at bay.

“I’m walking out that door, Nico.”

He takes a tentative step toward me. “If you think for a second I’m letting—”

He flinches when I squeeze the trigger. Nico jerks to the side and ducks as two of the whiskey bottles on the bar cart behind him explode in a hail of shattered glass.

The whole scene freezes.

My hand trembles, but I don’t lower the gun.

“I said I’m walking out that door.”

His chest rises and falls. But this time, he doesn’t make a move toward me. Maybe he finally understands this isn’t about power anymore, but about *me.*

I back toward the door, caught somewhere between grief and rage.

I fumble behind me for the knob, open it and step through, still facing him, still holding the gun.

Nico watches me with something raw in his eyes, not sure if I just walked away from *him* or everything all this bullshit never gave us the chance to be.

I don’t know which it is, either. Maybe both.

I close the door, leave the gun on the ground, and walk away.

I’m done.

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NICO

IT'S BEEN three days since she walked out of my apartment.

Three days since she pointed a gun at me, full of fury and heartbreak.

It kills me.

She's been staying at Milena's place. Which is smart, because that girl lives in a fucking *fortress*.

It makes it nearly impossible for me to go over there and drag her back—kicking and screaming if necessary—and tie her to my fucking bed, and apologize over and over until she understands that I didn't mean to fuck up this badly.

That I'm sorry.

That I need her more than I've ever needed anyone, and that it scares the fuck out of me.

But Milena living in a steel castle isn't the reason I haven't gone to get Naomi. There's always a way to reach someone. It's not like the Mercury Theater has armed guards.

It's me.

I fucking earned this.

The dark sensations slam into me all over again.

I used her own assault against her.

I mean…holy *fuck*.

I threatened her with it. I *built everything* upon it—everything we are.

Were.

"*P-p-please…*"

The steady drip-drip-drip of blood hitting the dirty floor blended with the half-conscious whimpers for mercy that is *never* coming pulls me from my thoughts.

Re-igniting the fury.

Forcing the self-loathing I'm wallowing in back to its cave as I morph back into a dark apostle of wrath and vengeance.

Speaking of *vengeance*…

I turn to let my eyes narrow on the two men hanging by the chains around their wrists, dangling from the rusty rafters of an old slaughterhouse. We're deep in Brooklyn, safely away from prying eyes and curious ears.

Out here, I am death, destroyer of worlds.

Or at least, destroyer of *their* worlds.

Adam Chapman and Steven Haines. Naomi knew them as Gus and Seb.

The two pieces of shit who put their fucking hands on her. Who lured her in with the promise of a photoshoot, then drugged her and sexually assaulted her while she was blacked out.

Put their fingers in her. Touched her wherever they wanted. Jerked their pathetic, tiny, rapist dicks while looking at her and came on her body. *Filmed* her at her most vulnerable moment.

Well, now they're in a hell they haven't even *begun* to comprehend.

I found them the fun way: *hunting* them. I watched the video again until I could pause it and zoom in on the window in the background. A window that looked out at a café, enough of the signage visible that I was able to find it in the West Village, figure out the angle, and then determine the building where Naomi was assaulted.

From there, a very prickly but ultimately helpful woman named Celine Rios, a ceramics artist who lives and works in the building, told me about the photographer and his assistant who'd sublet the top floor.

"Always in and out at late hours," she'd complained. "Bringing in all sorts of sketchy types. Not artists. Dangerous-looking men."

The top floor studio they'd been subletting still had signs of carnage when I saw it. The owners had already started fixing it up, but there were bullet holes in the walls, and clear bloodstains in the tile grout in the kitchen.

Celine didn't know what'd happened up there, but I do.

Leonard tried to start shit with the Obsidian Syndicate and sent people to the studio space in the West Village. There was a fight, and Mario, that contact who got me the fucking video, grabbed the thumb drive and got the fuck out in the middle of it.

There was still a square of plywood over the busted back window that leads to the fire escape, where Mario made his break for it.

After that, the hunt was easy. Both of the fuckers had gone to the café across the street a few hundred times, and most of the staff knew them.

Not as Gus and Seb. As their *real names*.

And here we are.

Steven, AKA Seb, sounds like he's trying to speak, but it just comes out as a wet cough. Blood drips down his chin from his ruined mouth, his jaw slack.

Probably broken, come to think of it.

I walk toward him slowly, my boots loud in the quiet stillness.

"Something you'd like to share with the group?" I ask, voice low. "Because now's your chance, while I'm giving my arms a rest."

He flinches, even though I haven't made a move to hit him again.

"W-we didn't pick her," he mumbles, blood still leaking from his swollen lips and trickling down his fucked-up face. "Th-they did."

"Who's *they?*" I snarl, grabbing a hank of his hair and jerking his head back.

He groans in pain, his eyes—excuse me, *eye*; he's only got the one, now—rolling around aimlessly in its socket as the chains he's hanging from rattle.

"I don't know…" he chokes wetly. "No one high up uses names. We were just told that she was the daughter of a congressman. We didn't ask questions."

Adam—*Gus*—wheezes beside him. "*I-I know…*" he croaks.

"I'm sorry, what?" I whirl and punch him in the dick, just because.

I should mention they're both completely naked and their chains are suspended from old meat hooks. I'm willing to bet Naomi isn't the first girl they've raped or assaulted together.

…So this retribution is a *long* time in the making.

“If you know, stop fucking crying like a little bitch and *tell me,*” I snarl, punching him in the balls again and making him choke on the blood dripping out of his fucking mouth.

“*Omar…*” Adam gurgles wetly. “*His name is Omar.*”

Wait. Why does that name sound familiar?

“And what is this Omar’s role,” I spit at Adam.

He coughs and wheezes, wriggling on his chain like a worm on a fucking hook.

“*He’s the one who brings orders from the guy at the top…*” he mumbles, fading in and out of consciousness.

Oh, can’t have that. He’ll miss all the fun.

I turn and grab one of the buckets of ice water I’ve got lined up behind me. Adam sputters when I splash it on him, sending him back into consciousness.

But just to make sure?

Yup. Another punch to the dick. Hugely enjoyable.

“Tell me more about Omar,” I hiss. “Last name. Address. What he looks like.”

Adam is openly sobbing now, writhing on his chain.

“*Don’t know his surname…*” he cries. “*Or where he lives.*”

“Adam, all I’m hearing is that you want to get hit in the balls again. And this time, I might have to use something sharp and pointy…or how about

that blowtorch over there." I turn, gesturing to the table of goodies I have laid out like a buffet.

He wails, shaking his head. "*I don't know! H-he's your height. Hispanic, maybe Middle Eastern. Light skinned, goatee…*"

For fuck's sake.

He's describing easily a fifth of the population of New York.

"Adam, Adam, Adam…" I sigh heavily as I turn toward my toys on the table.

"*Tattoo!*" he blurts in a broken voice. "*Yeah…tattoo on his forearm. A giant lion…wearing a Yankees cap…*" He sucks in a ragged breath. "*And a number eight…gothic font*."

Holy. *Shit*.

A month and a half ago, I met a man on a rooftop—a possible lead into who might be prying into the Black Court. Naomi accidentally saw me push the dumb fuck off a roof, but not before I'd had a chance to talk to him.

Hear his threats.

"*If you were this interested in meeting me, then that means you're worried about what me and my crew might already know about your little club.*"

I remember wondering how someone could have *that fucking bad* of a lion tattoo on their forearm.

And his name was Omar.

When it clicks into place, something dark blooms inside me.

Omar wasn't just "some guy". He was *Obsidian Syndicate*. And not some low-level foot soldier, either, if he was the link between these two fuck-bags

and “the guy” at the top.

Something cold ripples down my spine.

I’m beginning to think that the whole meet on the roof was a setup. The Obsidian Syndicate, looking for more weak spots—or, fuck, trying to kill *me*.

Shit.

“Tell me about this *guy at the top*,” I growl at them.

This time, Adam is dumb enough to *stop* talking. That’s an automatic punch to the dick.

Hey—I don’t make the rules.

“How about you, fuck-head?” I smile coldly, turning back to Steven. “Your balls need itching too, or are you feeling talkative?”

He whimpers, his eyes sliding toward Adam.

“Don’t look at him,” I grit. “Look at fucking *me*.”

“Th-they call him the Marquis,” Steven croaks. “I only met him once. I don’t know his name, I swear! But dresses really sharp, definitely has money.”

“Something I can *use*, Steven,” I growl. “Not his fashion choices.”

His lip quivers. “H-he…” He glances at Adam again before he apparently makes up his mind about something and drags his gaze back to me. “There’s tension,” he mumbles. “In the Obsidian Syndicate ranks—”

“*Stop…talking…*” Adam wheezes.

I flick him in the balls, relishing his pained shriek before I turn back to Steven.

"…You were saying?"

Steven nods eagerly, blood smeared all over his body.

"Th-there's a splinter faction within the ranks. Some people say the Marquis is getting sloppy. Going soft. Taking too much off the top." He turns his head, and blood dribbles out of his mouth. "Some of the guys… they want something new. New leadership, that kinda thing."

I'm not sure yet how any of this might be useful. Still, I mentally file it away.

And now I get to be the avenging angel of motherfucking death and fury.

"The sort of new leadership who might, for example, not use *rape* as a tool of coercion?"

My voice is pure venom and acid.

Steven trembles, blood dripping from his lip. "Look… We didn't even know who that girl was. We were just told to get it done. She was just a message."

Just a message.

The words crack something open in my chest.

I stare at him for a long second. Then I take a slow, deep breath, walk over to the table and pick up a crowbar, and turn back to the pair of them.

"Her name is Naomi. Not 'that girl.' *Naomi*."

Adam tries to mumble something, but I crack him across the jaw with the crowbar.

Steven starts bleating in terror.

“We didn’t know who she was!” he sobs. “They just told us to—please—we didn’t *know!*”

I turn to him, my grip tightening around the crowbar.

“It didn’t *matter*,” I hiss coldly. “It *didn’t fucking matter* who she was when you drugged her and put your filthy hands on her, and rubbed your limp little cocks to her.”

I raise the crowbar to his jaw, lifting his chin slightly with the end of it to make *damn* sure he looks into my eyes.

“*Now*, though,” I growl, “it matters.” My eyes narrow. “Because she’s *mine*.”

Warm liquid splatters my shoes, and I realize Steven’s lost control of his bladder.

“Now then…” I murmur, walking back to the table. I trade the crowbar for a rusty, not-very-sharp pair of gardening shears and turn back to them. “I’d like to know *exactly* which fingers you each touched her with. And don’t be shy. If you say nothing, I’ll take them *all*.”

Adam’s bleary eyes raise, horror on his haggard, bloodied face.

“*You…you promised us if we gave you wha…what you wanted to know…*”

“That I’d let you go?” I chuckle to myself, twirling the shears in my hand.

“*Yeah, and you promised Naomi she was just going to have her picture taken*.”

His face goes white.

“But don’t worry, you rapist piece of shit,” I say quietly. “Death is a *long* way off for both of you. Now, whose balls am I cutting off first?”

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NAOMI

I DON'T SLEEP much at Milena's.

I mean, her place is *beautiful*—ultra-modern, floor-to-ceiling windows, a private elevator that opens straight into the penthouse. It smells like jasmine, has silk throw blankets…well, *everywhere*…and I think every surface in the kitchen is imported marble.

There's both an espresso machine *and* a wine fridge in the bathroom of the guest room I'm staying in, both in comfortable reach of the bathtub.

Yeah.

But I still feel like I'm interloping on someone else's life.

Milena's been nothing but amazing since I called her, holding back tears, and asked if I could stay with her. First, she comforted me as I cried into her shoulder.

Then she offered to have Nico killed via a Bratva hit.

But she hasn't asked any questions or made any comments about what happened between him and me, and I haven't told her a single detail.

I can't.

I’m not ready to face that yet. I don’t know if I’ll ever be.

Milena hasn’t pushed it. She’s just made space for me in that amazing way she has. But even with her kindness, and her offer to stay as long as I want, it feels like I’m just floating along, waiting.

I hate it.

I keep replaying that scene in Nico’s apartment. The words that broke it all. The silence that followed. And the horror in his eyes when he dropped to his knees.

I wanted to forgive him.

God, I wanted to.

But the truth—that everything I gave him, everything I surrendered to him, was built on a lie—shattered something in me.

I keep telling myself I did the right thing.

But the ache in my chest feels more like grief than victory, and no amount of punishing self-imposed extra rehearsal time has been able to quiet it.

That said, I still find myself staying late after everyone else leaves, day after day.

I stretch in silence, alone on the stage, the tips of my pointe shoes whispering against the scuffed Marley floor.

Then, I start to dance.

The music’s in my head, but it’s so deeply ingrained it might as well be playing over speakers. I hear every note, leaping, pirouetting; my body moving as if pulled by invisible threads as I dance until the memories of

Nico taking me in his arms, capturing my lips with his, or just looking into my eyes burn from my mind.

Except that never really happens.

It’s impossible.

Instead, I just dance until I’m gasping from sheer exhaustion, and I slide to my knees, panting, my hair pasted against my temples.

From the wings, someone claps. Startled, I whirl.

Dove stands in the shadows, watching me with her arms folded. Her silver-pink hair falls in loose waves over one shoulder, the ends glowing in the low light like strands of silk. She’s wearing a cropped sweatshirt over leggings and scuffed sneakers, but somehow still looks *so fucking cool*, like she could walk onto the cover of a fashion magazine totally as-is.

Dove is the physical manifestation of my imposter syndrome—there, I said it. Maybe not *out loud*, but I can admit it to myself.

She’s gorgeous, a little mysterious, ridiculously cool, and *wildly* talented. Like, “best dancer in the company” talented.

Her also being my understudy for *Swan Lake*, a role she got literally on the day she joined the company, has been a *constant* source of anxiety for me. Not because she’s gunning for my role, she isn’t, but it feels like if I so much as blink wrong, she’d ready to step in, and she’d be *perfect*.

She always is.

Dove only joined the company a few months ago, and no one really knows much about her except for the fact that her father is Cesare Marchetti, don of the Marchetti Mafia family, and that she’s recently back in New York after being overseas somewhere for the last few years.

Naturally, the rumor mill has been running *wild* with that limited information.

Some people claim she was dancing somewhere in Europe. Others say she was at a high end, ultra-discreet drug rehab facility in Switzerland.

I'm guessing it was neither.

But Dove doesn't volunteer anything about herself, and no one ever dares to ask.

She's nice enough, in a distant sort of way. Polite. Clearly incredibly smart. But she keeps to herself. We're not close, but I like her.

…Even if she intimidates the shit out of me.

"You're very talented," she says, her voice calm and quiet as she tucks a strand of her silvery-pink hair behind her ear.

I blink. "Um…thanks."

She doesn't say it like a compliment. That's not to say that she says it like a sarcastic barb; it's not like that at all. It's just that she says it like it's an obvious statement of fact. Like gravity.

Dove steps a little closer to me, but not *that* close. She always keeps a little space around her—either to give other people space, or because *she* herself needs it.

It's…hard to tell with her.

"Can I make an observation?" she asks.

"Sure," I say, tucking a damp strand of hair behind my ear.

She smiles wryly. "You don't need more late-night rehearsals."

I blink. “What?”

“You don’t need to keep running your solos. You don’t need more hours at the barre. And you *definitely* don’t need more sessions with your overpriced physio.” Her lips twitch. “I mean, unless you’re into financial masochism.”

I let out a half-laugh, startled.

Dove arches a brow. “What you *need* is to look in the mirror and see just how good you are.”

I open my mouth, but she cuts me off with an elegantly raised hand—polite but firm.

“I’m not blowing smoke up your ass. I’ve been here long enough to see that Madame Kuzmina’s not exactly known for her warm and fuzzy nature, and she’s not dumb or sentimental.”

She pauses, smirking.

“If you weren’t the best, Naomi, she wouldn’t have made me your understudy. She would’ve straight up given the part to me.”

From anyone else, this might sound arrogant, or like a veiled threat. But from her, it just sounds *honest*.

Matter of fact.

Like she’s giving a weather report.

Dove doesn’t smile, exactly. But her expression softens a little.

“You don’t need to hear from me how good you are. You need to believe it yourself.”

She turns to leave, then glances back over her shoulder.

“Know your worth, Naomi,” she says.

Then she’s gone, just as quietly as she arrived.

I start moving again, half-heartedly. My body remembers the steps even if my mind doesn’t, but my focus is shot, and Dove’s words linger on me like a ghost.

Know your worth.

I’m still trying to puzzle that one out when I sense that unmistakable presence. That shift in the air, like gravity tilting off kilter.

I turn to stare into the darkness of the auditorium, my breath caught in my chest.

A figure slowly makes his way down one of the aisles, past the rows of empty seats toward the stage.

Toward *me*.

I don’t have to see his face to know who it is. My very skin remembers the energy of his nearness. The fine hairs on the backs of my arms prickle and reach for him.

The scent of leather, smoke, and masculine cleanness sweeps over me as Nico materializes out of the darkness. My pulse skips, my heart sliding up into my throat and my body stiffening as he climbs onto stage and stands at the edge of it, facing me.

Wordlessly watching me, drinking me in.

He’s in his usual dark jeans and black t-shirt, stretched over his firm chest and sculpted shoulders. His piercing blue eyes cut through the dimness between us like a blade, slicing into me, flaying me open.

Laying me bare, like always.

He takes a slow breath and starts to move toward me. I feel the air vibrate between us, the heat of the lights growing warmer as my skin flushes.

My breath catches quietly, my eyes going wide and lifting to his as he stops right in front of me.

God, I've missed him.

Everything I've been feeling comes rushing to the surface all at once. I want to hold him, and kiss him, and never *stop* kissing him.

But I don't even know what we are anymore.

…What we ever *were*.

He swallows once.

"You're everything to me, Naomi."

My mouth goes dry. My heart twists in my chest as my brain short-circuits.

"And you, Naomi," he murmurs, "Were never meant to be a pawn." He shakes his head. "You're the fucking *queen*, baby."

His jaw flexes. He reaches behind him, pulls something out of his waistband, and extends it toward me carefully, like it's made of glass.

I gasp.

It's an old, tattered libretto for *Swan Lake*.

Not just any copy. I know from the way this one's corners are bent and from the handwriting in faded blue ink on the cover.

It's my mother's.

I blink hard, my throat tightening up so fast it’s painful.

“I—I thought this was gone,” I breathe.

“It was,” he says quietly. “I got it back.”

I look up at him. His expression doesn’t waver.

“Your demons won’t be bothering you anymore,” he murmurs quietly.

There’s just enough finality in his tone to make it clear what he means. When I look down and see the flecks of red on his knuckles, it’s even clearer.

The air goes still around us as I take the score gently from him.

“Whatever you think of me,” he says quietly, “whatever you think of the things I’ve done—just know this.”

His eyes turn a piercing, luminous crystal blue.

“I love you, Naomi.”

Just like that.

No fanfare. No teasing. No games.

Just words that drop like a heavy stone into water, sending ripples to the shore.

He nods his chin once. Then he turns as if to leave.

“*Nico…*”

He freezes the second my fingers wrap around his wrist gently to stop him.

He turns back to me, and the look in his eyes is enough to break me.

“*I love you, too.*”

I barely get the words out before he surges into me, wrenching me tightly into his arms, grabbing my jaw possessively and kissing me furiously. I kiss him back fiercely, desperately, all the ache I’ve been holding in for days releasing like a dam crashing down.

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NICO

THIS ISN'T the morgue front desk guy's first rodeo.

As soon as I slide the thick envelope of cash across the desk, he drops his eyes, turns around, and hits a button on the security feed, reversing it about thirty seconds before he hits stop.

"I can pause the cameras for twenty minutes before the outsourced tech support figures out something's wrong and sends an officer," he grunts.

"I only need five."

"Got lube?"

My face twists. "*Excuse me*?"

"Lube," he says, still not looking at me. "Trust me, you're gonna need it—"

"*Believe me*, I'm *not*," I say, blanching.

What the fuck is wrong with people.

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

I'm still processing my disgust as he buzzes me through into the morgue itself.

I’m not here to screw a corpse. *Obviously*.

But if I *was*, I’d have a hard time fucking the particular corpse I’m here to see, given that it’s little more than a gelatinous blob of goo at this point, after falling thirty stories onto concrete and then being kept on ice for the last two months.

Inside the main room, with the scent of antiseptic in the air, I check the chart by all the metal doors along the wall, scanning for Omar’s name.

Not on the list. Good. It means several months later he’s still a John Doe. Unsurprising: I’m guessing they’ve had a *bit* of a hard time identifying him.

I scan the list of unknown bodies, and find one on the list with “severe blunt force trauma from elevated impact”.

Yup, that’ll be Omar.

I don’t really need to look at his corpse. I’m not here for his body.

I’m here for his secrets.

Through the back, I find a locked cage-room. But there’s just a regular hardware store lock on it, and I was picking those when I was eight.

Inside, I find a bin marked “Doe, John / 005213-R / UNCLAIMED.”

It’s sealed with a bright yellow evidence band.

Like that’s going to stop me.

I pull a knife from my jacket and slice through it, pulling the lid off before I start pawing through whatever Omar had on him when he shuffled off this mortal coil.

It’s all been cleaned, mostly. But still…*oof*.

Red-stained pack of gum, flattened. House keys and a wallet, also caked with red.

Finally, I spot what I came here for: his phone. It's in rough shape, obviously. But mercifully—from the phone's point of view, anyway—it seems to have been cushioned against any real damage by…well…*Omar*.

The screen is cracked to shit, and I don't know if the thing will ever turn on. But at least it's not in a gazillion pieces or embedded three inches into the sidewalk on 7th Avenue.

I slip the phone into my coat and close the box again. Then there's just one more thing to collect, unfortunately.

Thankfully, I find it, intact, and it doesn't take long. After that, I'm ignoring the front desk guy's snickered "that was fast" comment as I exit the morgue. I slide behind the wheel of my car, plug the phone into the cord, and start the engine.

I wait. And wait.

I stare at the phone, scowling. Fuck, it's as lifeless as Omar.

But suddenly, the thing lights up.

The phone's spiderwebbed screen flickers to life. When the lock screen finally pops up, I reach into my pocket and grab the Ziploc bag containing the other small token of Omar I needed to get back there.

Thankfully, *one* of his eyeballs managed to avoid turning to soft-scrambled eggs in his fall. And that's what I hold up in the plastic bag, angled at the screen.

I grin as the phone unlocks.

The home screen is a chaotic flurry of missed calls and texts. I scan a few of them, but it's just mundane crap. His email is likewise just regular bullshit.

No secret files. No hidden folders. Almost nothing but sports betting websites and porn in his web history.

Shit.

I growl to myself, aimlessly swiping through the phone before suddenly I stop and click on his photo gallery.

At first, it's about what you'd expect. Saved stupid memes, shitty selfies of him out at some dumb club. A couple of terribly lit pictures of his *supremely* unimpressive dick, photographed, bizarrely, with a toilet in the background.

I keep scrolling through the photos. Suddenly, I pause when I get to a video.

The thumbnail is just a dark blur. But the video is *forty-three minutes long.* That gets my attention.

At first, it's just dark shapes and the background noise of a bar. Then I fast forward a little and the view changes, as if Omar picked up his phone. There's a brief glimpse of his face as he positions the phone half behind a napkin holder, giving a view of him sitting in a dark booth in a cruddy-looking bar.

With his phone recording, and half-hidden?

Color me curious.

I end up fast forwarding through twenty gripping minutes of Omar checking his watch and sipping a beer.

Then suddenly, another figure appears—his hoodie up over a baseball hat as he slides into the booth across from Omar. He glances behind him and over

Omar’s shoulder before he finally slips off his hood.

What. The. Fuck.

The guy in the hat sitting across from Omar is *Vaughn*.

On screen, Omar clears his throat. He’s obviously trying to adopt an authoritative demeanor, but it’s also clear he’s a little afraid of Vaughn.

“Well?” Vaughn says, spreading his hands.

Omar scowls. “You need to drop it.”

“Be specific,” Vaughn grunts, his voice rougher than I remember it.

“You know I’m talking about the Black Court.”

My nostrils flare.

“You not supposed to be poking around them,” Omar continues. “That’s not the Marquis’ plan right now.”

“Well, it’s *my* plan,” Vaughn growls. His voice is low, almost feral.

“*The Obsidian Syndicate*,” Omar says tightly, gripping his beer, “is not about what you might want. It’s bigger than you. And what the Marquis says, goes. Period.”

Vaughn sighs, shaking his head as he glances away. “This is important.”

“Look,” Omar grunts. “I’ve helped you with off the books shit before. But this is different. You’re done.”

“I’m *not*,” Vaughn says flatly. “I need access to the Black Court. Either help me or get the fuck out of my way.”

“I’m fuckin’ warning you,” Omar hisses. “This isn’t a suggestion. Walk away from whatever the fuck you’re doing nosing around the Black Court

and get back to business as usual. That's a direct order."

Vaughn smiles smugly. "I don't seem to recall that *you* give orders to me, Omar. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's the opposite."

What the *fuck* am I watching?

And more importantly, how the *fuck* did I miss that fucking *Vaughn* is Obsidian Syndicate?!

Because you were distracted by a certain ballerina…

"This isn't from me, pal," Omar snaps. "It's direct from the Marquis."

Omar sputters, choking as Vaughn's hand shoots out like a viper striking, long fingers wrapping tightly around Omar's throat and forearm muscles flexing.

"As. I. Was. Saying," Vaughn says, his voice never raising, "it's *I* who give orders to *you*. I'd advise you to remember that."

Vaughn drops his hand from Omar's throat and stands from the booth.

"Stay the fuck out of my business, Omar. That's an order."

He turns and strides out of frame. Omar winces, rubbing his throat and swallowing before he glances around surreptitiously, turns to the camera, and retrieves his phone from its hiding place.

The video cuts out.

What. The. Holy. Hell.

My brain tries to make the connections, figure out how the *fuck* I didn't see this.

But there's no time for that right now.

I slam the car into drive, peel away from the curb, and roar off into the night toward the Mercury Theater.

The city whips past me in blurry streaks of red brake lights as I weave through traffic like a goddamn heat-seeking missile. Cold viciousness churns in my veins.

Just then, my phone—*mine*, not Omar's—buzzes with a call from an unknown number. Usually I ignore those, but this time, something tells me not to.

"Yes," I growl, hitting the answer button.

"Mr. Barone, I presume?"

The British voice is smooth, posh, and *very* old-money sounding.

I don't immediately answer.

"My name is Oliver Prince," the voice continues. "A mutual friend suggested I get in touch."

Right.

The Stag.

"I know someone in the UK who might know something about them. The Syndicate, I mean."

"Mr. Prince," I nod, weaving through traffic. "Thanks for reaching out."

"I apologize for the delay," he purrs in that exquisitely polished, proper accent. "But I do like to have my information entirely correct before I pass it along to others." He clears his throat. "Now, it *was* the Obsidian Syndicate you were interested in, yes?"

"That would be extremely helpful."

“I must tell you that I don’t make a habit of discussing current or former clients of mine with anyone.”

I frown. “*Clients*?” I hiss.

“I’m mostly retired these days,” Oliver says. “But I used to do a bit of financial maneuvering for clients with, shall we say, *checkered* backgrounds—the Obsidian Syndicate among them.”

“And you’re breaking your rule and telling me about them why?”

“Because *in* my semi-retirement, I find myself married, and a father. That has a way of changing one’s perspective.”

“Suddenly feeling guilty about managing money for the worst people on earth?”

Prince chuckles quietly. “Mr. Barone, I would imagine I’m encumbered by about as much guilt as you.”

I smirk.

I don’t feel any guilt at all. Pretty sure Prince knows that.

…Yeah, I think it’s safe to say we’re on the same footing here.

“Now, as to the Obsidian Syndicate,” he continues. “They don’t just move cash. They fund civil wars. Buy elections. Topple governments. They… don’t think small.”

I scowl. “So what the fuck are they doing in New York rigging up car bombs?”

“That, I’m afraid I don’t know. But I *do* know why they’re in New York in the first place. Rumor has it that there’s a bit of a *disagreement* within the upper ranks of the Obsidian Syndicate. Their current leader—who is only

ever referred to as ‘the Marquis’—wants to keep business as usual. Continue to sow chaos and wreak havoc in the more conflicted parts of the world for the right price. There are some in the organization who want to shift to more of a…well, *mafia* business model, much like your family’s. New York, with its infrastructure, distribution hubs and political ties, would be an ideal spot to begin that transition.”

He takes a breath.

“There’s a U.S.-based shell company that they funnel a lot of their business through, which has offices in New York. Cyprus Logistics, LLC.”

I slam the brakes at a red light.

That’s the company Kir was telling me about.

“And there’s nothing else on this Marquis person? You never met him while managing his money?”

Oliver hums. “I did not. I don’t really know who he is. Nobody does. He’s a bit of a cypher. Paranoid. Elusive. But I do know who his current second-in-command is.”

“Really,” I growl, yanking the wheel and tearing around a corner as I speed toward the theater.

“I recently did some light consulting for him—basic trust and money management. All terribly hush-hush, of course.”

“I don’t suppose your newly minted father status gives you a need to *share* his name, does it?”

Oliver chuckles. “He used an alias, of course, while we were doing business.”

Fuck.

“However,” Oliver adds, “we had a few video calls, and I’ve been in this world long enough to know the value of *insurance*. So I screenshotted a few pictures of his face. Just to…have.”

I spin the wheel again, taking another sharp corner and gunning the engine hard.

“What’s that going to cost me?”

Prince laughs quietly. “Mr. Barone, I can assure you, I don’t need your money. This is on the house. Consider it a personal favor in light of our mutual friend.”

Thanks, Stag.

“I’m texting it to you right now.”

I pull over to the side of the road as my phone dings, throw the car in park and open up my texts.

Holy shit.

It’s slightly blurry, but the picture is of the same man I just watched having a conversation about the Black Court with Omar.

It’s fucking *Vaughn*.

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VAUGHN

THE LIGHTS DAZZLE me as the bag is yanked off my head.

For a moment, that's all I can see: harsh, blinding lights, lasering into my eyes as I blink and try to focus.

My head swims as I replay the scene outside the theater maybe…what, an hour ago? Kuzmina was running the swans through a forced death march at her gulag.

…That is to say, holding a grueling extra rehearsal for the women that I'm guessing might well still be going on. Somebody's leg could fall off and she would probably tell them to stay in sync.

She's a sadist like that.

Honestly, it's one of the things I like about her.

But *while* said Russian death-march was going on, I snuck out into the alley behind the theater to grab a cigarette.

Yes, I know. They're bad for you.

But I didn't really think that health hazard would extend to having a fist slammed into my jaw and a bag yanked over my head before I was brought

to my knees and thrown into the trunk of a car.

I mean, you expect cancer. You *don't* expect assault and kidnapping.

I blink again, and my pupils begin to adjust.

The steel beams of a warehouse space loom overhead, and there's rocky rubble on a concrete floor beneath my feet.

Oh, and I'm tied to a chair.

Not my first time for that. But the kidnapping is new.

"You know, Nico, this isn't how I pictured our first date. If I knew you were *this* kinky, I mean…take a number, Naomi—"

I grunt, my head snapping to the side and blood spurting from my lip as his fist comes out of nowhere.

"You don't get to say her name," his voice snarls from the darkness. I hear his footsteps crunch on the rubble as he circles me like a predator.

"*Slightly* more aggressive than I usually go for," I grunt, turning and spitting blood onto the floor. "But, I mean, warm me up first, baby, and I'll play as rough as you—"

He hits me again.

Okay, *that one* was expected.

But now I'm fucking pissed.

"What's the matter, fucker?" I hiss, blood dripping from my lips. "Worried about facing me man-to-man after our last tussle? Decided to increase your odds this time by tying me to a fucking chair?" I spit another mouthful of blood onto the floor and glare through the lights at his shadow looming behind them. "*Pussy*."

His hits have made my head fucking throb, though. I wince, trying to shake off the ringing sensation in my ears as my vision swims again from the lights.

For a second—just a flickering second—it comes, like it does every now and then. A flash of a memory, maybe.

Lights swinging overhead.

A different warehouse.

A voice I can't quite place whispering something I can't really hear.

Then it's gone. Like always.

Most of the time, I *don't* want to know anything about the childhood I can't recall. I remember enough of the shadows that I'm sure it was nothing good.

I blink again, frowning as I glare through the lights toward Nico.

Yeah, nothing good about my present situation, either.

Nico bursts from behind the blinding lights, surging into me and slamming another fist into my jaw.

"*Fuck you*!" I roar, dribbling more blood. "Cut me loose, you fuckin' pussy!"

"I don't think so," he murmurs, circling me again. "As tempting as it would be to kick your ass man-to-man and wipe that fucking smile off your face."

“Does it *look* like I’m fuckin’ smiling, jackass?” I mutter.

“It looks like you’re starting to realize how fucked you are,” Nico tosses back.

“What the fuck this is? I mean I like to play rough, but one, I don’t fuck my friends’ sloppy seconds, and two, you are *truly* not my fucking type. Way too straight.”

“I don’t want to fuck you, you fucking idiot,” Nico spits.

“Good, because trust me, princess, you are *not* ready to bottom for someone like me—”

Yeah, that’s another *entirely* expected punch to the face. Still, it doesn’t stop the snarl of rage from bubbling up inside me as blood gushes from my mangled lip.

Fuck this.

I can fight. I mean, I grew up in the foster system in New York. I can get down in the dirt and dole out some fucking hurt if I have to. But this shit—whatever the fuck this shit *is*—is different.

It brings up memories of other kids in the group homes pinning me down so they could get their licks in.

That’s not fighting, like this isn’t. That’s just poking the fucking tiger through the bars of its cage and calling yourself a hunter.

“You think this is funny?” he growls.

“I mean, not *ha-ha* funny,” I mutter. “But, you know, existentially?”

Another punch, right to my abs. I grunt, doubling over as much as I’m able to, tied to the chair as I am. When I look up into his eyes, a sense of dread

and coldness rips down my spine.

Fuck. He's really not playing. But I have no idea what the *fuck* any of this is about. What, just because we got into it before? He doesn't strike me as the fragile ego type. Then again, he did go all fucking aggro on me about…

My brow wrinkles. "Is this about…*Naomi*?"

His face darkens again.

"*Wait*," I spit. "Before you fuckin' hit me again, just *wait*. Nico, I seriously have no idea what the fuck I'm doing here. Is it a jealousy thing?! How many times do I have to tell you, I'm *not interested* in your girlfriend. She's like a goddamn sister!"

He looms over me as his eyes pierce into mine.

"This isn't about jealousy, Vaughn. This is about answers."

"*Regarding*?"

His eyes narrow. "Why don't you tell me about the Marquis."

I stare at him. He stares back.

"…*What*?" I finally snap.

"Your boss. Let's talk about him."

"My…" My brow furrows. "My *boss* is sadistic thirty-something Russian woman who thinks drinking water during a rehearsal is being lazy. But fine, fuck it. What do you want to know about Kuzmina?"

"Don't get fucking cute," Nico growls.

"*Get*?" I make a face. "Baby, I don't need to *get*—okay, STOP!" I hiss, right as he winds up again.

“Nico, from the very bottom of my heart, I haven’t the slightest goddamn idea why the *fuck* we’re here, why the *fuck* you’re hitting me, or what the actually unholy FUCK you want me to say!”

“I want you to tell me about the Obsidian Syndicate!”

I stare at him blankly. “The *what*?”

Nico disappears behind the lights, then returns and approaches me again. He tosses something at my feet—a file folder that spills open as I look down at it. The paper inside fans out a little, and my gut clenches.

“You were found in an Obsidian-owned drug warehouse,” Nico says tightly. “Age nine.”

I look up at him, red mist clouding my eyes.

“State custody records for minors are sealed for a fucking reason, asshole,” I say quietly.

I’m not going to bother asking how Nico fucking Barone got his hands on my foster records. I don’t need to hear some bullshit story about them “falling off the back of a truck”.

“Let’s talk about that warehouse, Vaughn.”

I shake my head. “That what we’re doing here, Nico? Talking about my fucking childhood?” I bark out a cold laugh. “Joke’s on you, dipshit. I don’t remember *shit* before I was placed in a group home.”

“How convenient.”

“It’s actually a *nightmare*,” I hiss. “But thanks for the fucking sympathy. It’s not *convenient,* Nico. It’s a bunch of shit I don’t even know if I *can* unpack, let alone want to.” I shoot him a look. “If you’re hoping I’ll confess to

something I can’t remember, you’re barking up the wrong psych evaluation.”

He stares at me for a long moment.

“Why don’t we jog your memory.”

I glare at him. “You keep *jogging my memory* and I’m going to have permanent brain damage, dickbag.”

Nico pulls out his phone, taps the screen, and turns it to face me. A video starts to play.

In it, a guy is sitting alone at a booth in some bar, sipping a beer. Then someone else comes over and sits down opposite him. The guy pulls his hood back…

What the actual fucking fuck.

It’s me.

It’s fucking *me* sitting at that booth. Except it’s *not.*

There’s something off.

Nico’s babbling on, threatening me with something or other, and I’m pretty sure he’s mentioning Naomi and whatever this syndicate thing is. But I’m ignoring him, just staring at the screen, trying to spot the glitch in my personal Matrix.

Then I do.

The guy on the screen stretches his arms a little, and the sleeves of his jacket ride up, revealing more of his forearms.

Bare, un-tattooed forearms.

“That’s not me,” I say quietly.

The video keeps playing. Nico smirks at me like he’s just caught me red-handed.

“Nico, that’s *not fucking me*,” I snarl, louder this time.

“Enough,” Nico sighs. “You’re fucking done. So start fucking talking—”

“*Look at his forearms*, jackass!” I roar, nodding at the screen with my chin. “Do you see any fucking tattoos?”

Nico’s hesitates.

“Just look at the goddamn phone!” I snarl.

His eyes sweep the lower part of the screen. Then his gaze slides from the phone to *my* arms, bound to the seat of the chair near my thighs.

…Which have tattoos all over them.

“That’s *not fucking me*,” I spit.

Nico starts to open his mouth, but he’s interrupted by a voice from the shadows.

“He’s right.”

Nico whirls, reaching to pull the gun from his waistband.

“Not one more move,” the voice growls. “Pull it out slowly, drop it on the ground, kick it away.”

The voice steps closer, enough that the lights glint off the metal gun barrel in his hand, pointed at Nico.

Nico’s jaw tightens as he slowly pulls the gun from his waistband, drops it to the ground, and pushes it aside with his toe.

“That’s not him in your video, Mr. Barone.”

The shadow steps closer, into the light. Until suddenly, he’s no longer a shadow.

My world glitches.

Not a shadow. A fucking mirror.

Of *me*.

My brain refuses to believe what my eyes are showing me. I’m looking at *literally me*. Closer-cropped hair, no visible ink, and a scar on his left temple, but otherwise?

It’s me…staring right at me.

Nico’s looking between us now, trying to recalibrate, like someone just broke his internal clock.

“Why… Why the fuck do you look like Vaughn?” Nico growls.

My mirror takes a slow, deep breath before exhaling.

“Because I *am* Vaughn.”

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NICO

FOR A SECOND, it feels like time itself has stopped. Like the whole world has ground to a numb, creaking standstill.

What the *fuck* am I looking at?

Two fucking Vaughns, that's what. One stands a dozen feet away, the gun in his hand pointed at my chest with unflinching precision. And across from him—still tied to the chair, still catching his breath, still bleeding—is the *other* Vaughn, staring at his double with the same confusion I feel tightening in my gut.

In that frozen moment, I drag my gaze back to the Vaughn holding a gun at me and start to dissect the details.

He's got the same face as the Vaughn I know. But everything about it is a little more serious. More hardened, rougher around the edges. He's got the same bright blue eyes and same dark brown hair. But his is cut a little shorter, with less of that "messy cool" style.

And sure enough, when my eyes drop to his exposed forearm, they're devoid of any tattoos.

“Untie him,” the doppelgänger holding the gun says, his voice a more roughened, razor-edged version of Vaughn’s.

I hesitate.

“I said *untie my brother, right the fuck now*.”

The old slaughterhouse is pin-drop silent except for a distant drip-dripping in the shadows. The rustle of a pigeon.

My brother.

Houston, we have a fucking problem.

Slowly, I turn to look back at Vaughn. He’s got the same stunned look of disbelief and confusion on his face that I do.

Holy shit.

“I’m not going to ask you again,” the gunman growls thinly. “Fucking untie him, or this goes very differently.”

I show the guy my hands as I turn and walk over to Vaughn.

“I’m going to reach for a knife.”

“Do it fucking slowly,” the man says.

I pull the blade out of my pocket and reach down to free Vaughn’s wrists. He groans as the pressure releases, slumping forward, catching himself with a wince.

He looks up at me, whispering. “What the hell is this?”

“*Fucked if I know*,” I mutter as I squat down and cut his ankles loose.

Vaughn stands on shaky legs, his face twisted in pain. Then I’m shoved aside, and before I can even register what’s going on the guy with the gun is

throwing his arms around Vaughn and hugging him fiercely.

Vaughn stiffens, that utterly confused look still on his face. But then he's hugging the guy back, sagging against him a little.

"There's a lot to say," the doppelgänger says softly, holding Vaughn's shoulders as he steps back, looking at him. "A *lot*."

He glances over his shoulder at me, then back to Vaughn.

"I'll explain everything, but first, I need to talk to Nico. Alone. It would be better for your safety if you don't hear."

Vaughn nods, wincing as he lowers himself into the chair. His eyes lift to mine, glinting darkly. "Don't think for a *second* that you and I are done, motherfucker."

That's fair. I reach into my pocket and toss him my cigarettes and lighter. He catches them with a grunt, glancing back at me. "Yeah, still not fucking done."

New-Vaughn glances at me and gestures with his jaw. I follow him a few yards away, still eyeing the gun in his hand.

There's another difference between him and the Vaughn I know. Vaughn walks like a dancer. An athlete. This guy walks like a soldier.

We stop near a shattered window and a pile of bricks and he curiously puts the gun away.

"Firstly, I owe you a thanks."

My brow furrows. "Excuse me?"

"Omar was trying to play me, sell me out. You took care of that problem for me."

My eyes darken. “Who the fuck *are* you.”

He smirks. “I told you. I’m Vaughn.”

“Stop talking in riddles,” I spit.

“I’m not. *I’m* Vaughn. And *that* is my brother.” He turns, his mouth pulling into an almost sad smile. “Val.”

“You’ll need to expand on that.”

“I will, but we don’t have time for that right now.”

My jaw tightens. “Why is—”

“I need you to *listen*, Mr. Barone.” He rolls his neck. “You think I’ve been trying to pry into your secret society,” he says. “You think I’m a threat to the Black Court.”

“You’re Obsidian Syndicate,” I hiss.

He shrugs. “The Obsidian Syndicate isn’t a hive-mind, Nico. For a long time—some would say *too long*—it’s been helmed by one man and his… singular visions.”

“The Marquis,” I murmur.

He nods. “His leadership has grown stagnant and self-serving. The Obsidian Syndicate is not just some mercenary force,” he growls. “It’s *home* to the people who exist within it. A brotherhood. A community.”

“I’m getting some serious cult vibes,” I mutter.

His blue eyes flash. “You’re talking about my family, Mr. Barone. Kindly show some respect.”

Something Prince said to me on the phone earlier clicks in my head.

“You’re the head of the splinter faction, aren’t you?”

He nods. “Some of us remember what the Obsidian Syndicate used to stand for, what it was capable of. Not just soldiers for hire to serve one man’s ambition.”

“And you want the throne.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I’m not embarrassed to admit it. Yes. I do.”

“So…take it,” I grunt.

“It’s not that easy.”

“Bullets to the back of the head have a way of making things *very* easy,” I drawl.

He shakes his head. “Not in this case. This is why I’ve been trying to get the attention of the Black Court, Mr. Barone.”

My nostrils flare. “I don’t know what—”

“Or *Raven*, if that feels a more suitable name for this conversation,” he purrs.

For a second, I contemplate killing this fucker right here and now. I don’t know how the hell he knows all this, but it’s fucking…concerning, to say the least.

“That isn’t widely known by the brotherhood, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he murmurs, like he’s reading my thoughts. “Only by me.”

“*How*,” I growl.

“Because I’m very fucking good at what I do,” he snaps back. “Nico, I haven’t been prying into the Court to find its weaknesses. I’ve been trying to get your *attention*.”

“And why is that?” I mutter.

“If I simply kill the Marquis, I’m viewed as a traitor. And the second his body drops, half the Obsidian Syndicate goes to war with the other half.”

He steps closer, lowering his voice.

“But if the *Black Court* executes him…?”

I bark a laugh. “We’re not mercenaries, fuckhead.”

“I’m not saying you are. I’m merely asking you to do what you do: seek the wrongs within the underworld and be the corrective force that…fixes them.”

He pulls a manila envelope out of his jacket. “I believe the Court takes a dim view of those who reneg on, or cheat their way out of, a blood marker?”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Fifteen years ago, the Marquis was in a bad spot, and he got help from a Bratva kingpin out of Novosibirsk—Boris Vabnik. He saved the Marquis’ life, but made the Marquis sign a blood marker owing Vabnik a debt.”

He clears his throat and hands me the envelope.

“You’ll find indisputable proof in there that the Marquis had Vabnik killed a year ago for no reason other than to erase his debt to him.”

Fuck.

Murder doesn’t mean shit to the Court. But a broken blood marker? That’s sacred.

“The whole case is right there in that folder,” he says. “I just need you to bring it to the Black Court. And I need your word that you’ll convince them

to act, and to carry out the execution."

"What are you about to tell me you'll do for me in exchange?" I murmur. "I know that part's coming."

He nods grimly. "Indeed. Mr. Barone, at this precise moment, a squad of hitmen is on its way to kill Naomi Kim."

Everything goes from zero to a thousand miles an hour in a quarter of a second. Adrenaline explodes through my system as my heart explodes into my throat.

"*What*!?" I roar.

When he doesn't immediately respond, I launch myself at him, grabbing him by the collar and shaking him as I snarl into his face.

"What the *fuck* did you just say?!"

"A hit squad," he grunts. "Obsidian Syndicate-trained. With orders to find Naomi Kim."

Everything inside me goes cold.

"It's not about you. It's about her father. They're hitting Leonard where it hurts. She's the only piece he can't control anymore."

I slam him back into the crumbling stone wall, my face a mask of livid rage.

"I can call them off, Nico."

His voice is completely devoid of emotion, but there's a finality his eyes as they lock with mine.

"But I need your word first."

I snarl as I slam him against the wall again. "*Make the fucking call*."

“Your *word*, Nico. Promise you’ll follow through with my request. Guarantee it.”

“What you’re asking requires the whole Court to vote!” I roar. “I can’t—”

“You can. And right now, you *really* should.”

“We don’t have fucking time for—”

“No, *Naomi* doesn’t have time,” he replies. “Again: if you want my help stopping those men from spilling her blood in the streets of New York, you *will* make this happen, right now. And it should go without saying that if I help you…and you fail to help me…there is no length I won’t go to make sure you have a front row seat the next time one of your family members gets into a car.”

My blood turns to acid. But it’s an easy call to make. Naomi’s life is on the table. If I have to cut out my own fucking heart to make sure the Court follows through on this, that’s what I’ll do.

I whirl away from him and yank out my phone.

Five names on a group chat in a secret, secure messaging app. One we only ever use in case of dire emergencies.

THE RAVEN

We’re bringing the head of the Obsidian Syndicate to trial. Immediately.

THE BULL

C’mon, man.

THE WOLF

We already fucking talked about this. You know I sympathize with your situation, but this is NOT a court issue.

THE HOUND

Calling you in a sec

THE RAVEN

It’s different now. I have proof of him offing a Bratva kingpin to weasel out of a blood marker.

THE RAVEN

I need this voted on RIGHT THE FUCK NOW.

THE STAG

How serious is this proof?

THE RAVEN

Concrete. Iron-clad. He’s OURS. But it needs to happen immediately.

THE BULL

We’ll set up a meeting

THE RAVEN

Not fucking good enough. Naomi’s life is on the line. VOTE. NOW.

THE HOUND

If you can send us this proof, we’ll have him picked up asap. Trial by this weekend. But we NEED that evidence.

I crouch down, spreading the files, photographs, and documents from the manila folder on the dirty ground. This guy wasn’t fucking kidding. They have phone taps, explicit directions from the Marquis, photos. It’s all here.

I snap some pics and then send them to the group chat, my pulse throbbing.

THE WOLF

Fuck me, I’m in.

THE STAG

Yeah, clear to me. I’m in, too.

THE BULL

Let’s get this motherfucker TODAY

THE HOUND

It’s a yes from me as well.

My phone dings with a private text.

CARMINE

Well done, man. Really fucking well done.

I whirl back to Vaughn’s clone, or twin, or whatever the fuck he is.

“You’ve got your ask,” I hiss. “Now make the fucking call.”

“May I remind you—”

He grunts when I slam into him, driving him into the wall behind him.

“*Make. The fucking. CALL*.”

He nods once. When I release him, he turns away from me, pulls a phone out of his pocket, and lifts it to his ear.

Suddenly, he stiffens. With a curt nod, he pulls the phone away and turns back to me, face grim.

“The hit team is already en route, *and* they’re ignoring my orders. Which means they’re loyal to the Marquis.”

I see *red.*

I start to reach for my knife but the other man shakes his head.

“You gave your word, and I gave mine. In this world, our word is all we have.”

He fixes me with a hard look.

“So now I’m going to help you stop them.”

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NOAMI

IT'S FUNNY: I remember walking into Nico's apartment that first time with a sense of dread, like I was going to prison. I remember staring at the walls and windows and noticing how soulless the place was.

It doesn't feel like that anymore.

Now, when I step into his—*our*—apartment, it feels lived in.

Like home.

I drop my ballet bag by the door, peel off my hoodie, and stretch out my shoulders and triceps. For once, I didn't stay late, pushing myself to the brink of collapse chasing some invisible, ever-moving goalpost, trying to outrun my imposter syndrome.

Weirdly, I feel okay about it.

I quietly thank Dove and her little pep talk the other night for that. Then I make a mental note to ask her if she wants to hang out some evening soon.

Know your worth.

I'm trying, Dove. I'm trying.

I head to the bathroom and let the shower scald my skin until I'm a loose-limbed prune. When I step out, I throw on cotton shorts and one of Nico's T-shirts, which falls to mid-thigh on me and smells faintly like him. Fuzzy socks complete the chic ensemble, and I pad back to the living room, fall onto the couch, and turn on some mindless reality TV.

New, improved Naomi takes the damn night *off*.

I glance at my phone. Nothing from Nico, which is a little strange. He usually tells me when he's going to be out late.

Just as I'm debating texting him, an incoming message lights up the screen.

DAD

Naomi. I need to speak with you urgently.

I stare at it, old instincts bubbling up, that frantic pull to *fix things*, to be the daughter he wants.

DAD

Honey, please. It's very important.

I hit the lock button and flip the phone face-down on the table.

That's another *New Naomi* thing I'm working on: choosing myself.

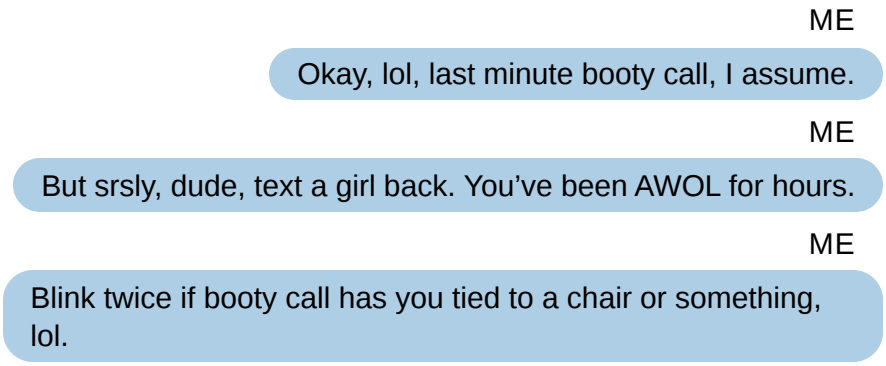
I sink onto the couch, Nico's shirt warm against my skin, hair damp at my neck.

The reality show is even more boring and mindless than I thought it would be. So a minute later, I pick the phone back up and click on my text thread with Vaughn.

Weird.

He still hasn't responded.

He wasn’t required for the latter part of rehearsal today, but he always sticks around, even just to be a pain in my ass. But today he didn’t, and there’s still no reply to me asking him where he went.


ME
Okay, lol, last minute booty call, I assume.
ME
But srsly, dude, text a girl back. You’ve been AWOL for hours.
ME
Blink twice if booty call has you tied to a chair or something, lol.

Still no reply. I stare at the phone, an uneasy feeling creeping down my spine. Not quite fear yet. Just the beginnings of a bad feeling.

THUD.

I jolt upright on the couch, heart punching my ribs. The reality show is still playing, but that sound didn’t come from the TV.

It came from the door.

I snap my head toward it and shriek when another slam rocks it, so hard that the frame splinters.

My blood ices over, and I’m already running as the door bursts in behind me.

I bolt into the kitchen, bare feet skidding on the tile, and dive into the walk-in pantry. I shove the slatted door closed behind me and crouch low, forcing myself not to sob, or breathe too loud, or shake.

I hear the low thud of boots on the hardwood floor.

“Fan out,” a voice grunts quietly. “She’s here. The Marquis’ orders are kill on sight.”

My heart stops.

I bite down a gasp and press my hand to my mouth, crouched behind a rack of canned tomatoes and imported oils, eyes locked on the entryway through the thin wooden slats.

Four of them move into the apartment dressed in tactical gear, faces covered, guns out.

One moves to the bedroom. Another heads down the back hallway.

A third starts for the kitchen.

…Straight toward me.

He moves with precise, deliberate movements, like he already knows I'm here. Like this is a game that I've already lost.

My whole body trembles. I shrink back farther against the shelves, nails digging into the wood.

He's almost at the door.

Two more steps and he'll—

Gunshots rip through the silence.

I scream and flinch. But the man standing right in front of the door whirls away from me at the sound, and I realize it's someone *else* shooting.

More rapid-fire shots tear through the air, followed by a man screaming in pain. Another shot, another cry.

The man in the kitchen is backing up toward me when he suddenly grunts, reeling backward, blood erupting from his torso and spurting across the floor.

My hands slam over my mouth, trapping my scream just as another figure slowly moves into the kitchen.

Moving with dark intent. Gun drawn. Walking *right* toward me.

Please. I don't want to die like this.

Please, please, please—

The pantry door slams open and I scream, raising my hands to shield myself.

"*Naomi*!"

It's Nico.

He storms into the pantry like madness unleashed, eyes blazing, smoke still curling from the barrel of his gun. He grabs me and pulls me to him like I'm oxygen, and I collapse into his arms with a sob, clinging to him, choking on relief.

"It's okay," he breathes into my hair. "I've got you."

A grunt makes my eyes fly back open. The gunmen on the floor is staggering to his knees, blood pouring down his arm as he aims his gun at Nico's back.

"NICO—!"

Another shot crackles through the kitchen.

The attacker jerks, then crumples like a puppet with its strings cut.

But that's not where my eyes are looking in pure shock.

I'm staring at the man standing behind the body, gun still raised, eyes steely.

Vaughn.

At least…*sort of*?

The man *looks* like my friend, but with a different haircut, and no tattoos on his arms. But then Nico pulls me to him again, burying his face in my hair and clutching me like I might blow away in the next breeze, and that's all that matters.

"You're okay, love," he growls quietly. "You're safe now."

"Naomi!"

My brain short-circuits, my eyes not trusting themselves as Vaughn rushes into the kitchen from around the corner. This Vaughn is bleeding all over the place and looks like someone just beat the shit out of him.

And now he's standing next to the *other* Vaughn, who's lowering his gun.

"*What the fuck*?" I whisper.

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NICO

"YOU WERE six when they took us."

Vaughn—the real Vaughn, apparently—is leaning against the kitchen island, eyes trained on his brother, who's perched on the counter across from him, holding a gauze to his busted lip.

Like someone split a mirror in half and left the shards facing each other.

Same jaw. Same build. Same restless twitch in their fingers.

"I was seven," Vaughn continues. "Mom and Dad had checked out a long time before that, though. It'd been you and me taking care of ourselves for about a year." His jaw tightens. "Heroin, both of 'em. Dad boosted carburetors; Mom turned tricks in the living room." He clears his throat. "They're, uh, both dead, by the way. Died years ago."

Jesus. I glance over to where Vaughn—no, fuck, *Val*—sits on the countertop, his face a stony mask as he takes all this in.

Naomi's at his side, holding his hand. I won't lie and say I'm *fine* with that. I'm not. But in this moment, given what he's being told, I'm willing to give the fucker one pass. ONE.

“I’m sorry you have to find out like this,” Vaughn says as Val’s gaze drops to the floor. “I know you don’t remember anything after what happened—”

“What *did* happen?” Val grunts.

“I’ll get there,” his brother murmurs. “The Obsidian Syndicate busted us when we broke into one of their fronts—this mattress shop. This was in McKeesport—” He pauses, frowning. “That’s where we’re from, by the way. McKeesport, Pennsylvania.” His brow knits. “Sorry, I’m not the world’s greatest storyteller.”

“Just keep fucking going,” Val growls quietly. He pulls my pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and slips one between his lips.

I sure as shit don’t smoke in my own house. But again, he gets a pass on that.

Vaughn nods. “It was winter, and cold as fuck. Mom and Dad had fucked off somewhere, and there was no heat in the house. Your lips were blue, and I honestly thought we might die if we stayed there. So we got our coats on and went downtown. I broke into the mattress shop because you were always saying every time we walked past it that those beds looked so comfortable.”

He glances away.

“The Obsidian Syndicate used this shop as a safe house because McKeesport is right outside Pittsburgh. When you and I walked in that night, they were in the middle of torturing some fucker about God knows what.” His jaw tightens. “They could have killed us for seeing that, but I dunno. Maybe they had recruiting numbers to hit back then.” He shrugs. “Either way, they took us with them that night, and brought us here to New York—”

He nods his chin at the pack in Val's lap. "You mind if I snag one of those?"

Val nods and tosses it to him. I scowl as Vaughn lights up.

"Yeah, just go ahead and set my whole apartment on fire with my own fucking cigarettes," I mutter under my breath.

Naomi shoots me a warning look and squeezes Val's hand.

Treading on thin ice there, ballerina…

"We went to work in a drug factory. It was mainly kids working there, actually." Vaughn frowns. "Small hands, and kids don't steal drugs. We packaged up heroin and coke for distribution to street level dealers…all day, scooping rocks or powder into bags, making sure the number was always the same on the scale. Rinse. Repeat."

Val stares at him, unmoving.

"It kept us fed and housed," Vaughn grunts. "And they weren't cruel to us. We slept in a room with eight other boys, got three meals a day, and that was that."

His hands curl slightly in his lap.

"Then there was a raid."

Naomi's breath catches.

"It was…messy," Vaughn says. "The cops came in, guns blazing, shock grenades, the whole bit. I don't think they knew it was kids working there. But you…" He grimaces as he takes a drag of his cigarette and looks up at Val. "You got hit. Not badly, but you got knocked the fuck out. The Obsidian guys were grabbing whatever they could—merch, the kids, whatever—and bolting out the back door as the cops were coming in through the front."

He lifts his eyes to his brother again.

“They…they wanted me to check if you were dead or not.”

Vaughn exhales shakily.

“I knew what was going to happen if I said you were alive,” Vaughn says quietly. “I mean, it wasn’t a terrible life. It was a step above freezing to death in McKeesport while our parents shot up in a shitty motel. But you…” He looks away. “You deserved better. So I told the bosses that you were dead.”

Naomi covers her mouth.

“I slipped my wallet into your pocket when they weren’t looking so you’d have some money. I mean I didn’t know what was going to happen to you, but I figured the cops would find you, and…well, money’s always good, right?“ He smiles wryly. “I didn’t think until years later, when I was finally able to check to see what had happened to you, that my gym ID had been in that wallet.”

He laughs to himself, taking another drag.

“Me and some of the older kids used to play basketball at the YMCA down the street from the building we all lived in. One of the guards would take us, but we needed an ID card to get to the court. So when the cops found you, and you couldn’t remember shit, and since we look so fucking similar…”

“I became Vaughn,” Val says quietly.

His brother nods. “Yeah.”

For a long moment, no one says anything. The only sound is Naomi’s shaky exhale as she leans into her friend, her eyes darting back and forth between him and his brother like she’s trying to make sure she’s not losing her mind.

Val rubs his wrists, still raw from the ropes. He shakes his head slowly, letting the puzzle pieces settle into place.

Vaughn shifts slightly, glancing down at the floor, then looking at Naomi.

“You saw me once,” he says with a hint of amusement in his tone. “A few weeks ago. Across the street from the theater, outside the coffee shop.”

She blinks, then nods. “Right. I thought I was going crazy.”

“Nah.” His voice softens. “I was watching this guy.” He nods at Val. “I kept tabs on you for years,” Vaughn continues, looking at his brother now. “But always from a distance. I couldn’t risk the Obsidian Syndicate figuring out who you were. Who you were to me. I figured the only thing that would come of that would be them killing you, or dragging you into this shit.”

He rubs the back of his neck tiredly.

“But when they started moving into New York—when the orders started getting darker—I couldn’t stay away so much. Not with you in the city, too.”

He looks up again.

“I just wanted to keep you safe. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Val grins at his brother. Vaughn smiles back.

“So…” Naomi says, turning to her friend. “You’re *Val* now?”

Val lifts a shoulder, half-shrugging, half-wincing.

“I…guess so?” His lips twitch. “Never really felt like a Vaughn, to be honest.”

Vaughn snorts.

“You shouldn’t,” he grunts. “Vaughn can’t dance to save his goddamn life, trust me. But I hear you’re pretty decent.”

Val smiles, for real this time.

“Val,” he says slowly, testing it out. “I like it. Like Kilmer.” He smirks. “I’ll be your huckleberry,” he drawls in a not-so-terrible *Tombstone* impression.

All of a sudden, Naomi’s face hardens. She turns back to Val, brows pinched.

“Are you going to tell me what the hell happened to your face, now?”

I brace myself when Val’s gaze flicks to me but he just sighs, glances back to her, and shrugs.

“Misunderstanding,” he mutters.

Naomi turns slowly toward me.

“Wait… Was this *you*!?”

Before I can say anything, Val slides off the counter with a grimace and walks over to me. “*Nah*.” He claps me on the jaw like an Italian *nonna* might, half jokey, half a warning.

That’s fair. I deserve that.

“Not him,” Val grins. “Although this one cares a whole lot about you, baby girl.”

Naomi flushes, her lips parting like she’s going to say something, then picks up a roll of gauze.

“Well, let’s get you fixed up,” she says. “You really do look like a wreck.”

Vaughn taps my shoulder.

“Let’s chat over here?”

We leave the kitchen, step over one of the bodies, and move into the living room.

Vaughn leans against the back of the couch, arms folded, expression sharper again now that the warm, fuzzy personal shit’s out of the way.

“Just remember,” he murmurs. “You gave me your *word* on the Black Court.”

“We’re taking the Marquis into custody today or tomorrow. Trial’s tomorrow night. That fast enough for you?”

He nods.

My brow knits. “What exactly are your plans when you take over the Obsidian Syndicate? Word is that you plan to set up shop here in New York following more of a mafia family business model.”

Vaughn says nothing.

“You can probably understand why I might not find that such an agreeable idea, given that *my* organization is a mafia family business.”

He shrugs. “Feel however you like about it, Nico. I will say, I don’t have any plans to go to war with anyone.” He smirks. ”At least—not immediately.”

Try it and we’ll see who knows this city better, motherfucker.

Vaughn smiles darkly. “But I also won’t forget your help with this. Unfortunately, that’s as much as you’ll get from me for now.”

There’s a pause. He clears his throat.

“You should talk to Naomi.”

“About?” I growl tensely.

“Her dad might be a self-serving fuck, but he’s not a killer.”

My eyes narrow. “Where I come from, giving the order is the same as pulling the—"

"It was a setup, Nico,” Vaughn exhales. “The Marquis really decided to take it personally when Leonard wanted to cut ties with the Syndicate. I think he had it in his head that the congressman was going to be President one day, and we’d have direct influence on the most powerful man on earth. So, when Leonard wanted to end our business, the Marquis set up that car bomb —which was meant for your father, by the way, *not* your sister.”

My lips curl into a snarl before he holds his hand up.

“*Not* my orders, and I had no say in that. The goal was to put it out there on the streets that Leonard had hired us to kill your dad, which would obviously mean you or your brother taking out *Leonard*. Problem solved.”

I stare at him. “My sister almost fucking *died* just so you could get someone else to do your dirty work of killing the congressman?”

Vaughn tilts his head. “Again, not my orders. But this is how we operate in the Syndicate.”

His eyes darken with a sudden flash as they glance past me to the kitchen, then pull back to me.

“I…know what was done to her,” he growls thickly.

That red-black mist swirls inside of me as my jaw grinds.

“That would also be the Marquis’ doing,” Vaughn says. “And that is *not* the sort of thing that the Syndicate will have any part in, ever, going forward,” he hisses quietly.

My eyes turn steely. “If you’re missing two of your men—”

“I’m not,” he says flatly. “But I do hope you made the misery last. And so you know, I’ll be seeing who else in the organization may have had anything to do with that abhorrence. If I do find anyone else…” he looks right at me. “They’ll be handed to you on a silver platter to do with as you please.”

“I can work with that,” I grunt.

He takes a breath, folding his arms over his chest.

“She’s strong,” he says measuredly, nodding past me to where Naomi is standing in the kitchen with Val.

“I know.”

Vaughn nods. “She should also hear from you instead of the media, though, that I’ll be releasing some files soon. Leonard Kim’s name will be all over them in regards to blackmail and bribery.”

My brow arches. “Not that I really give a shit, but why throw him under the bus now? The Obsidian Syndicate suddenly has a moral compass under you?”

“More like I want cut ties with anyone who could have anything they might one day hold over our heads,” he says flatly. “That includes Congressman Kim.”

We walk back into the kitchen, where Val is a bit more patched up and helping himself to one of the beers in my fridge to go with yet another of my cigarettes.

He’s also still standing pretty fucking close to Naomi.

My jaw grinds.

I know I *did* beat the fuck out of him a few hours ago. But still. There are limits.

Lucky for him, Vaughn walks over and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” He smiles wryly as he and his brother look each other in the eye. “We’ve got a *lot* to catch up on.”

Val gives Naomi a hug. Just as I seethe past my breaking point, he releases her and turns to me, clapping me on the back.

Then, the two brothers—Val and Vaughn—walk out the busted front door.

Naomi turns to me slowly, hair mussed, blood on her clothes that isn’t hers.

Instantly, I pull her in, wrap both arms around her waist, and kiss her.

She melts—soft and warm and completely *mine*. Her fingers tangle in the back of my shirt as she leans into me, as if everything tonight didn’t happen. Like for a second we can just *exist* together.

She giggles into my mouth and pulls back, breathless.

“Hey, Nico?”

“Yeah, baby?”

Her smile curves.

“Could you take me someplace I can keep kissing you where there *aren’t* dead bodies all over the floor?”

I smirk.

“I can do that.”

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NICO

THE FLAMES in the cathedral torches burn steadily, casting shadows across the stone columns and masked faces.

The Black Court is now in session.

The Marquis stands in the center of the chamber, his posture straight and arrogantly defiant.

The fact that he's not begging *really* pisses me off.

The Hound speaks.

"You stand accused by this Court of assassinating Boris Vabnik in order to avoid paying your debt, thereby violating a sacred blood marker."

He pauses. No one says a word.

There is no defense, only judgment.

Five masks. Five votes.

Each "guilty" from our lips falls like a hammer.

No one's made a fuss about my demand to mete out the punishment tonight. And of course, the Marquis doesn't choose "flight", because let's be real:

the motherfucker looks close to eighty. At his age, I'd get him before he even took ten steps into the labyrinth.

When I step forward, his proud, arrogant expression wavers just a little.

"Choose your weapon."

The Marquis shifts—only slightly, but enough for me to see it.

His veneer breaking.

His certainty gone.

"I can pay you," he murmurs. "Whatever you want. Come now, we're both men who understand how the world works."

I take a step closer.

"Choose. Your. Weapon."

"I can make things disappear," he presses. "I have reach. I have protection—"

"You *had* reach and protection."

He swallows twice. His posture changes, arrogance unraveling in real time.

"There's no need for blood," he says. "We can make a deal."

I step so close to him I can see the glint of fear in his eyes. The final, desperate bid for survival.

"*You sent men to hurt her*," I say, my voice low.

His brow furrows for a second, like he doesn't immediately understand what I'm saying. But then… There it is. The spark of pure fear in his eyes.

Fuck, I could inhale that fear and get high off it.

“She—”

“I’m no saint,” I growl. “And yes, I understand how our world works. But…” My jaw grinds as I get right into his face. “You hurt what’s *mine*. You sent men to lay hands on *what. Is. MINE*.”

“I—I—” He stammers. “We can work something—”

“*Choose your fucking weapon*,” I snarl. “Or I’ll assume you’ve chosen bare hands, and I’ll kill you right here with mine.”

“She was just collateral—”

My right hand is around his throat in half a second. Squeezing. *Hard*.

His eyes bulge obscenely from his head. His face turns purple as he claws and kicks and tries to escape my wrath.

Not happening.

I look right at him, my fingers wrapping tighter and tighter, not a *drop* of mercy in my veins as I watch the light flicker in his eyes.

Then, with a final, futile paw at my wrist, it goes out.

I let him fall.

He hits the stone floor like a bag of rotten meat, and the chamber goes silent.

There’s no applause. No commentary.

Only the low torchlight crackling.

Justice isn’t clean. It’s not righteous. Definitely not holy.

But it’s been done.

I just wish it had taken a bit longer for him to die.

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NAOMI

THE HOSTESS LEADS me to the table in the back corner of the glass-walled restaurant overlooking Central Park.

My dad smiles as I approach.

He looks…good.

Despite the absolute *shitstorm* about to land at his feet, he still looks every inch the power broker. Navy suit, perfect posture, not a strand of salt-and-pepper hair out of place.

But his eyes look tired. Like they know damn well what's coming, and soon.

He stands when he sees me: I blink at that. He even pulls out my chair. I sit stiffly, more confused than comforted by these sudden attentive gestures.

"Hi…" I say.

He smiles faintly. "Hi, sweetheart. Thanks for agreeing to meet me."

My God. I haven't heard him call me that in years.

"You can thank Nico for that," I say with a shrug. "He…convinced me."

He really did. He told me that after his dad's heart attack a few months ago, he couldn't imagine having missed any chances to spend time with him. Granted, Vito Barone is an *amazing*, loving father. And my dad is—well, you know.

But still.

The server glides over and takes our orders—poached salmon over Greek salad for me, and, interestingly, a *cheeseburger* for my father. I gaze down at the tablecloth, picking the edge of my napkin, wondering who's going to start.

"I know what's coming," he finally says, hands folded on the white tablecloth. "I've spoken to my lawyers, I've seen the files. I know what's about to come out." He pauses.

"Is this the part where you tell me none of it is true?" I say dryly, looking up.

Dad smiles sadly. Then, slowly, he shakes his head.

"I've worked with some bad people, Naomi. Really bad. I had only one goal, one vision." He exhales through his nose. "The White House. The Oval Office. And nothing was going to get in my way."

He looks out over the park, as if looking for the man he used to be.

"I told myself everything I did was for the greater good. For my legacy. For you. For the country. I sold it to myself a thousand different ways…" He pauses. "But the truth is, it was greed and ego. Nothing more."

My stomach tightens, twisting.

"So no, Naomi, I'm not going to tell you it's not true. Because most of it is. I bribed. I manipulated. I lied. I turned a blind eye to things I shouldn't

have. I turned myself into a man with no exit strategy."

Something dark throbs inside of me.

"Including murder?" I ask quietly.

Dad frowns. "Pardon me?"

"The bad people you worked with…" I hesitate. "Did you ever condone or order murder?" I look away. "Or…sexual assault?"

I already know the answer to this. Nico's already told me everything, how the former head of the Syndicate set up the bombing at Vito's birthday in an effort to make the Barone family take out my father. That my assault was yet another tactic to hurt Leonard.

But these are the sort of people my father worked with. And I have to hear it from him.

I *have to*.

He's silent so long that dread pools in me. But when I risk a glance back at him, his face is pale and horror-stricken.

"Christ," he chokes out, looking away. "I really did fuck up if that's what you think I'm capable of." His head shakes decisively. "No, Naomi. *God*, no. I was *never* involved in anything like that. I need you to know that."

I search his face. He's not pleading. Not deflecting. He just looks…old. Honest.

And very tired.

His mouth twists.

"I was a bad father," he whispers quietly.

I blink. “Dad—”

“No,” he interrupts gently. “Let me say it.”

He leans forward, the first signs of a tremor in his hands.

“I was cold and dismissive, and made you feel like you didn’t matter.”

I blink faster, my lips parting.

“It wasn’t a mistake.”

I frown. “What?”

“It was on purpose, sweetheart.”

It feels like a rock slamming into my chest.

“After your mother died, I saw what it did to you. I watched it hollow you out and break you. And I knew, with the people I worked with, the world I operated in—there wasn’t exactly a zero percent chance of me dying younger than expected, if you get my meaning.”

His voice cracks.

“So I made sure I wouldn’t be someone you’d mourn.”

I don’t speak at first.

I can’t. There’s too much in my throat and in my chest. In all the quiet spaces that used to ache for exactly this kind of realness from him.

“*Dad—*”

He’s out of his seat in a second and on his knees beside me, his arms around me, mine around him. I sob into his shoulder, clinging to him as all the years of heartbreak come rushing out all at once.

“*Naomi*,” he chokes, holding me tight as he strokes my hair. “I’m so fucking sorry, sweetheart. For all of it.”

We stay like that for several long minutes, until our tears are dry, and I’m just holding him because I’m realizing I’m going to be losing him for a while.

“How…” I swallow as he pulls back, then slips into the banquette to sit next to me. “How long will you…you know…”

He nods. “The lawyers say ten years. Maybe a little less, with good behavior.”

“And then?” I ask.

“Well, I’d say my political career is probably over.” He smirks, something old and familiar flickering in his expression. “Though these days, who knows.”

I laugh quietly. Sadly.

“Or… Who knows? Maybe I’ll write a damn book,” he adds. “God knows, I’ve got enough material.”

I don’t let go of the silence this time, and he takes my hand like it’s the first time in years he’s felt that he’s allowed to.

His palm is warm. Rougher than I remember.

“I’ve been a bad man, Naomi,” he says. “Greedy. Short-sighted. Selfish.”

He squeezes my hand.

“But I never once stopped loving you.”

Tears are slipping down my cheek before I can stop them.

“And I am *so very proud* of you.”

That’s the final straw.

I get up from my chair and wrap my arms around him as I sob against him.

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EPILOGUE

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NAOMI

THERE'S ALWAYS a kind of energy right before a performance, just before the audience quiets and the curtain rises, that feels like a held breath.

I honestly love that feeling.

Backstage the Mercury Theater is humming with nerves, the rustle of costumes, whispers, and the distant tuning from the orchestra pit. The smell of rosin and baby powder hangs in the air, mingled with deodorant and sweat.

The theater is full. Not with the usual season ticket holders or random walk-ups, but a VIP-only crowd for this "Special sneak preview performance" of *Swan Lake*.

It's not the first one we've done, and I doubt it'll be the last before the show officially opens. But Kir feels they're important for drumming up investment and patron money, and if that keeps the lights on and the rest of us employed, I'm all for it. Plus, hey, I like the practice.

Tonight, since we're only doing excerpts from the show, I'm in my Odile costume already.

The black swan. The temptress. The deception.

My tutu with the feathers on the shoulder fans out in a halo of sequined black tulle. My eyes are lined with smudged kohl, lips painted a wicked blood-red. The mirror barely feels like it shows *me* anymore, and instead, it truly feels like I've become someone else.

And yet, I've never felt more myself.

Evelina stretches on the floor as Milena finishes pinning my headpiece, her fingers deft and precise.

"So, is he coming tonight?"

I blush as I turn to Evelina. Obviously, the secret about Nico and me being together came out a while ago. But in the last few weeks, since the night those men came crashing into Nico's apartment, it's become a lot more *open* a thing.

As in, no longer a tabloid scandal. Now, it's just *us*.

I lift a shoulder. "I'm not sure. He had some stuff he had to take care of tonight, but he's going to try to make it, even if it means sneaking in halfway through."

Evelina sighs. "Now where can *I* find a boy to sneak in halfway through?"

"You're looking for a boy to sneak it halfway in your *where* now, baby girl?"

Eveline turns deep crimson as she whirls and slaps at Val's chest.

"That is *not* what I said! Don't be gross!"

Val grins, wrapping a muscled arm around her shoulders. "Evie, if the day ever came where you actually shed that innocent persona and let someone touch you, I feel the Earth would actually stop spinning."

Evie blushes and playfully elbows Val in the ribs.

Milena rolls her eyes. “Don’t a be dick.”

Val grins, taking a dramatic bow. “C’mon, Milena. Would you ask the sun to stop shining? Lucali’s Pizza to stop being delicious? Naomi to stop coming to morning class with sex bruises all over her body?”

My jaw drops as my face throbs, and I whirl to jam a finger into his shoulder.

“I liked you better when you were Vaughn.”

Honestly, I thought it would be harder to switch from Vaughn to Val after, well, *surprise*. But it’s actually been pretty easy.

Still doesn’t stop me from coming out with zingers like that, though.

“Well, *Vaughn* is currently setting up shop as New York’s newest criminal kingpin, so…” Val shrugs. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Does this little meeting of my favorite people have room for one more?”

The four of us whirl, grinning when we see Bianca walking in with Lyra.

“Hey!”

I bolt to her, losing the first hug to Milena, who gets there a little faster. But when it’s my turn, I squeeze her tight.

“God, you look terrifying,” she says with a grin, pulling back and admiring my makeup.

“Mission accomplished,” I smirk.

“You made it!” Eveline squeals as she hugs Bianca.

She and the baby are doing just fine, but our friend has officially taken a leave of absence from the company. Which is obviously sad, but it's to make sure she's extra safe and sound. She was planning on starting mat leave when she hit her second trimester anyway, so this only kicked the timeline up a few weeks.

She's *sworn* that after she has the baby, she'll be coming right back to work. But I have a feeling there'll be a *slight* grace period there.

"Of course I came!" She winks at Evie, like that was ever a question. "For now, I just can't wait to see you guys kill it out there."

Val and Lyra walk her back to the stage door, and Milena and Evelina skip away to stretch on stage. I head to my private dressing room because…

Oh, yeah. I get *my own dressing room.*

Welcome to the world of being a principal dancer.

Yes, it *does* feel a little elitist. But it's *amazing* to have my own space where I can just zen out before the performance starts.

I step inside and close the door before heading over to the gorgeous, old-school vanity with the lights around the edge, like something out of *Cabaret.*

I'm leaning in to check my eye makeup when suddenly I feel it.

The shift in the air. The heat crawling over my skin, like it knows something before I do.

I turn.

Nico stands in the doorway of the dressing room, leaning against the doorframe, dressed all in black and looking like fucking *sin*. The black

button up stretches across his firm chest, open at the neck to show the swirls of his tattoos.

I walk toward him without thinking.

He doesn’t say a word, and neither do I. When I reach him, he draws me into his arms and kisses me like the world’s ending.

“I thought you were sneaking in halfway through,” I whisper as I pull back, breathless and grinning, my lipstick smeared across his mouth.

“I thought sneaking in *here* beforehand would be much more fun.”

I tuck my head into his chest for a second, just breathing in his leather, smoke and darkness.

Over the speaker system, the stage manager gives the thirty-minute call.

I pull away reluctantly with a sigh. “I should warm up.”

Nico’s eyes flash.

“I think I can help with that.”

Before I can say anything, his hand slides around my waist. Suddenly, I’m gasping as he lifts me, kicking the door shut behind him and walking us over to the vanity.

His mouth crashes to mine, hard and hungry, hands already sliding beneath the layers of tulle and mesh to undo the snaps at the gusset. I gasp as he lifts me up onto the vanity, scattering makeup brushes and compacts.

I whimper when he spins me around again, setting me down on my feet and roughly bending me over the vanity. A moan rips from my throat as I look up, the vanity bulbs haloing our reflection in soft gold.

“Look at you,” he murmurs against my neck, his hand under my tutu. “You look like sin in feathers, ballerina.”

His hand cups my already slick pussy through my tights. I moan, lifting my hips to his palm.

“Fuck, baby, I’ve barely even touched you and you’re already making such a fucking *mess*,” he growls.

I whimper.

Then he slips his fingers into the waistband of my tights, yanking them down as I gasp eagerly.

“*Nico…*”

He pushes me farther over the vanity, gripping my ass in both hands and spreading me wide open.

“Watch yourself,” he says darkly. “Keep your eyes on the mirror.”

He drops to his knees behind me.

His breath ghosts over my inner thighs and I shudder, palms flat against the cool wood. My eyes flick to the mirror and the image of myself—bent over, black tulle and feathers fanned around me, smoky eyes wide, cheeks flushed.

And then his mouth is on me.

I gasp, my hips jolting as his tongue slides through my folds, slow at first—just enough to tease me and pull a whimper from my throat. He groans like I taste better than sin, hands bruising my thighs as he pulls me back against his face.

“Fuck,” he breathes against my sex. “I just want to exist right fucking here forever with my tongue in this pretty little pussy.”

His tongue swirls over my clit and I jerk and buck, grabbing the edge of the vanity like it’s the only thing anchoring me to Earth.

“Eyes on the mirror, baby. I want you to watch yourself when I make this little pussy come all over my tongue.”

I force myself to look.

It’s obscene.

My mouth is open, eyes glassy, chest rising and falling with every shattered breath. Nico’s tongue thrusts into me, fucking me against the vanity as I writhe on his mouth. His lips wrap around my swollen clit, sucking hard and batting the tip of his tongue over the aching bud until my thighs are literally shaking.

“You see that?” he growls into my skin. “That’s what it looks like when I *own* you.”

A broken cry rips from me. I’m close already—*so* close.

His tongue gets faster, more brutal, flicking and sucking and *feasting* on me like he wants the whole fucking theater to hear what I sound like falling apart.

And then, I do.

I come with a scream, my thighs shaking, the mirror fogging in front of me.

He’s not done.

He stands behind me, his eyes bright and his lips glistening with my cum. He grabs the back of my head, yanking it up and twisting it to the side

before he hungrily kisses me. I whimper, tasting myself on his tongue as I greedily suck it into my mouth.

I moan into his lips, lost in the sinful kiss as I hear his belt being unbuckled and his zipper being drawn down. I shiver when I feel the hot, swollen thickness of his cock spring free, slapping my inner thigh before it grazes my sensitive pussy.

"*Fuck, Nico…*"

"Now," he murmurs, dragging the head of his cock through my soaked folds. "Watch what I do to *my* fucking ballerina."

He presses in slowly, but with his size, that first moment of penetration no matter the speed always takes my breath away.

Fuck, he's so big.

But the stretch burns in the best way, a whimpered gasp somewhere between pain and bliss catching in my throat.

"Keep watching," he growls. "I want you to see what you look like when that tight little pussy swallows every fucking inch of my fat cock."

I lift my head, eyes locking on the mirror.

There I am—bent forward, tutu fanned out, Nico's hands clamped around my hips as he sinks into me. His face is twisted with need, his jaw tight, his throat working as he pushes deeper.

"Look," he rasps. "Look at how *fucking pretty* you are stuffed full of my cock."

I moan.

“You were made for this,” he snarls, starting to thrust hard. “Look how fucking beautiful you are taking that cock, baby.”

God, the way he makes me feel like the most beautiful girl in the world when he’s worshipping me.

He slides out, leaving just the swollen head stretching me open before he suddenly rams right back in, making the vanity creak beneath us.

Oh *fuck yes*.

Every time he slams into me, I see it in the mirror: my mouth open. My lashes fluttering. My cheeks flushed and wrecked. His hips pounding relentlessly.

“This is what you needed, isn’t it?” he grunts. “Look at yourself, baby. Look at what I do to you. Feel how fucking deep in your tight little cunt I am, Naomi. That’s where I belong—right here, buried inside you, making you take every fucking inch of my cock like a good girl.”

My whole body tenses up, pressure building sharp and fast.

“I’m gonna—” I gasp.

“Come all over my cock? You’re going to be my fucking good girl and come *all fucking over* that fat cock, aren’t you.”

“*Nico!”*

“But you don’t get to come until I tell you to,” he bites out.

I whimper. Begging. Squirming.

His hand snakes around to my throat, fingers firm as my blood roars in my ears.

“Say it,” he hisses. “Say who this pussy belongs to.”

“You!” I choke, shuddering. “*You.*”

“Again.”

“You, Nico—*fuck*—you, it’s—*fuck*—yours, always yours.”

“That’s right.”

His pace gets faster, harder, more brutal. My legs tremble.

“Now come for me, ballerina,” he growls. “Come for me like *my good girl*.”

I do—loudly and violently, shattering. The orgasm rips through me, shaking me to my core as my toes curl in my shoes and my body wrenches and shudders. I sob against the mirror as he drives into me one final time and explodes with a groan. His cum bursts into me over and over in thick, powerful ropes before he collapses over my back, his breath hot in my ear.

For a second, neither of us moves.

Finally, he kisses my shoulder. Slowly. Reverently.

Then he bites it.

Fuck, I love this man.

“All warmed up now?”

I laugh, breathless. “Warmed…ruined…wrecked. All of the above.”

He grins. “Good.”

Nico kisses the back of my neck, then slowly and carefully pulls my tights back up. He snaps the gusset of my tutu closed and smooths the bodice, his fingers gently adjusting the feathers just right. Then he cups my jaw, turning me to face him in the mirror.

“Ready to be their queen?” he murmurs.

I nod, flushed and glowing, lips kiss-bruised.

“Then go show them who the fuck you are.”

He kisses me again, gentler this time.

“Wait! I need to fix my makeup!”

After I do so, when we step out of the dressing room, the lights feel a little brighter. The energy sharper.

I blush fiercely as I feel him—*his cum*—dripping into my tights.

The stage manager walks by with her clipboard.

“Places, please.”

I move into the wings, Nico trailing a few steps behind.

Bianca spots us from where she’s apparently snuck back in to watch from backstage and winks. Evelina whispers something to Milena that makes her roll her eyes and smirk. Val is leaning against the stage manager’s desk, looking dramatically bored and effortlessly cool, as always.

I take a deep breath.

Then I walk on stage, step into my spotlight, and take my starting position.

I center myself. The orchestra swells.

And as the curtain rises, I feel it—not fear, not nerves.

Power.

I’m not just Odette.

Not just Odile.

Not simply the girl who survived, or the one who triumphant over her self-doubts.

Tonight, I'm *everything* I was always meant to be.

* * *

The Darkest Dance series continues with Nero's story in *Dance of Madness*.

Haven't gotten enough of Nico and Naomi?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser: https://BookHip.com/KXFRZNP

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Ruin.* But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DANCE OF DECEPTION

Thank you so much for reading *Dance of Ruin*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Jagger Cole universe continues with Nero's story in *Dance of Madness*. If you'd like to catch up on some of the other characters mentioned in this book, though, you can also dive in to *Dance of Deception*, Carmine and Lyra's story. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

Fair warning: bring your running shoes…

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dance of Deception*.

* * *

Chapter 1
Lyra

Ballet isn’t art. It’s war disguised as grace.

“Again.”

Every muscle in my body is on the point of collapse, but Madame Kuzmina doesn’t care. She sits in her seat, dead center, four rows back from the stage, watching us like a hawk from the shadows beyond the lights, her fingers steepled under her chin.

Vaughn exhales sharply beside me, his jaw clenched. Brooklyn doesn’t bother holding back her groan. She collapses forward, hands on her knees, sucking in air like we’ve just run a marathon.

“We’ve done it four fucking times already,” she mutters under her breath.

Madame Kuzmina raises a single hand, glittering with rings, in a regal motion. She doesn’t need to raise her voice. Her stare alone is enough to suffocate.

“And now you will do it a fifth,” she says quietly in her Russian-tinged accent, “because the fourth was fucking *garbage*.”

Vaughn and I exchange a glance. His crystal blue eyes flicker with amusement, but I don’t return the smile. I'm too exhausted.

There’s no crying in baseball. And there sure as *shit* isn’t any smiling in ballet.

Brooklyn straightens with a sigh, smoothing a hand over her leotard. “Fifth time’s the charm?” she mutters.

We begin again, running through the *pas de trois*. My mind goes blank the way it always does when I dance—nothing but the music and the movement. Vaughn’s hands on my waist, firm but controlled, lifting me effortlessly. Brooklyn spinning into position beside us.

We run through the *entire* thing again before hitting our end position perfectly, Brooklyn and I on either side of Vaughn, and for the first time tonight, Madame Kuzmina doesn't tell us to do it again.

Instead, she nods.

Once.

"That will do. For now."

I hide the relief washing over me in a wave. Vaughn lets go of our hands with a dramatic groan, then flops onto his back at center stage, staring up at the ornate ceiling.

"Ballet is a fucking disease," he announces to the air.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and nudges his leg with her foot. "At least you get to wear flats."

"Trust me, princess, you do not want to see me on pointe."

Despite my exhaustion, I smile. Vaughn is chaos wrapped in infuriatingly incredible talent. When he's dancing, he moves with an effortless grace. Off stage he's all sharp edges and wild energy, a stray dog that's never been fully domesticated.

Madame Kuzmina rises to her feet, rearranging the silk draped over her arms. "We begin again at nine tomorrow. Arrive warmed up and ready to go."

With that, she wraps her shawl around herself like Maleficent's robes and melts up the darkened aisle of the Mercury Opera House, disappearing into the shadows. There's a brief flicker of light as the door to the lobby opens and then closes again.

Naomi appears at the edge of the stage, twirling her water bottle in one hand and nodding in the direction Madame Kuzmina has gone. “Such a ray of fucking sunshine,” she deadpans.

Vaughn rolls onto his stomach. “And yet she loves me.”

Brooklyn snorts. “She tolerates you.”

Vaughn winks, pushing himself up. “Tolerates, loves, same difference.”

I shake my head and turn toward the wings, heading for the dressing room. My legs ache, and even my skin feels tired. I need a hot shower and about fourteen hours of sleep.

The dressing room is empty, since the rehearsal day was done long ago. But Madame decided to focus her keen eye on Brooklyn, Vaughn, and I and had us stay late, since we’re the ones performing the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*, which the Zakharova will be performing in a few months' time.

Naomi follows me in, already undoing her bun. She’s our Odette/Odile, aka, Swan Queen, for the upcoming performance. And her reason for staying late has nothing to do with Madame Kuzmina and everything to do with *herself*.

No matter how many times you tell Naomi she’s amazing, she refuses to listen. I swear, the girl drinks imposter syndrome smoothies for breakfast.

“Tell me you’re coming out with us this weekend,” she coaxes, leaning against her locker. “Or are you going to pretend you have an exciting social life when we both know you don’t?”

I smirk. “Tempting, but I need sleep more than overpriced cocktails.”

As if I could *afford* overpriced cocktails. Or reasonably priced ones. Actually, even happy hour pricing might be off the table given my current

financial situation.

Naomi groans. “You’re such a grandma.”

Brooklyn drops onto the bench beside me. “I might actually be dead by the weekend,” she mutters. “Kuzmina is a fucking sadist.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is *Russian.*” Naomi grins.

Vaughn appears in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. “Personally, I like my women with a touch of organized crime.”

Brooklyn makes a face. “You would. And get *out*, dude. Guys' dressing room is down the hall, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“But I get so lonely all by myself.” He grins smugly before he peels off his t-shirt and slings it over his shoulder.

Vaughn has the sort of body that can only be described as “sinful”. The motherfucker has like zero percent body fat, is freaking *ripped*, and is covered in strategically placed tattoos. Coupled with his Mediterranean skin tone and vaguely Italian looks, it’s easy to see why his social calendar is perpetually filled—with dates with both sexes, I should add.

Vaughn strolls over to a locker and opens it before he turns to wink at Brooklyn. “You know I keep a second locker with my shit in here. And relax, it’s not like any of you are my type.”

He starts to take off his tights. Yeah, that’s my cue to turn around and avert my eyes. Sinful body or not, Vaughn's and my relationship—pretty much his relationship with any of the girls in the company—is more sibling-like than anything else.

Brooklyn snorts as she peels off her own tights and leotard and replaces them with underwear and yoga pants.

“I thought that your ‘type’ was ‘has a pulse and at least one willing hole’.”

“Pulses are overrated,” he grins.

“*Dude*,” Brooklyn makes sour face and shakes her head.

Vaughn laughs as he turns around, now at least wearing boxers. “Like you’d ever let me near you, baby girl.”

Brooklyn wrinkles her nose as she tosses on a hoodie. “Gross?”

Vaughn shrugs. “The feeling is mutual, and I say that with love. No, what I mean is, I don’t play hard to get. If someone doesn’t want me, I’m already gone. You want this…?”

The three of us collectively roll our eyes as he runs a finger down his ludicrously defined abs and cups his dick through his boxers.

“You have to show me you want it.”

“Yeah, hard pass, *friendo*,” Brooklyn says dryly.

“Again, the feeling is entirely mutual, baby girl.”

I giggle, turning to haul my dance bag out of my locker. I wriggle out of my leotard and wrap a towel around myself getting ready to shower, then dig through the bag, fingers searching for my MetroCard. But all I find are a few loose quarters and a crumpled one-dollar bill.

Shit. Not enough for the subway home.

I press my lips together and force the knot of frustration down.

I reach for my water bottle, catching my reflection in the mirror hanging on the inside of the locker door. My brow furrows, my gaze lingering on the way my collarbones are more prominent than they were a few months ago.

“Here.”

I jolt, turning at the sound of Naomi’s voice. She doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but passes me a granola bar.

“I’m good.”

My friend cocks one brow. “I don’t want it,” she says evenly. “So—take it.” Her eyes stay on mine. “And *eat it*,” she adds quietly.

I smile wryly as I peel open the wrapper, taking a small nibble. Naomi doesn’t know everything about my life, but she knows enough to see when things are…slipping.

Like me, Naomi is making it work by herself on her dancer's salary, somehow. The difference is, she’s got a safety net if she *really* needs it. You’d have to stick a gun to her head before she'd call her congressman father to ask for help. But the option is there.

For me, it's not. My safety net was gone long before the monster who was my father bled out in a prison cell.

Brooklyn and Vaughn are talking loudly about Kir Nikolayev, the very enigmatic Bratva kingpin who owns and bankrolls the Zakharova Ballet… specifically, how “fuckable” he is…when Naomi and I leave them and trudge to the showers.

The ache of the extra-long day melts just a little as the hot water pours down over me.

“Hey… You’re good, right?”

I turn to glance over at Naomi, who’s rinsing off at the next showerhead.

I know what she means.

“Yeah, I’m…fine.”

She pushes her long, dark hair out of her face and gives me a piercing look. “For real?”

I exhale. “Yeah, it’s just…” I shake my head. “I’m starting to wonder if school on top of this is too much.”

Between the credits I got for advanced classes in high school, and the college courses I took a few years ago, I’m about two-thirds of the way to a degree in human psychology. The lofty goal is that when ballet eventually ends—whenever that is—I’ll try my luck at the MCATs and med school, and try to become a clinical psychiatrist.

Hey, I *did* say “lofty”.

Naomi exhales as she turns to rinse off her back. “Yeah, pre-med *does* sound like a lot on top of this, even part time.” She glances at me, her brow still cocked. “Is that all?”

Goddammit, this girl always sees right through me.

“Vera’s been gambling again.”

She groans. “Are you fucking serious? I thought your mom was banned from every casino and racetrack in the state.”

“Yeah, well, she must’ve found *someone* who lets her place bets through them.”

“Shit.” Naomi frowns. “Look, I know you hate—”

“We’ll be fine,” I smile as I turn the water off. “But thanks for the offer.”

She nods, not pushing it.

Vaughn and Brooklyn are already dressed and somehow *still* talking about Kir's "big dick energy" when we get back from the showers. I pull on yoga pants and a hoodie before I remember the lack of means to get home tonight. I wince as I glance at Naomi.

"Hey, you wouldn't have a spare MetroCard on you, would you?"

Naomi's eyes flick toward my bag, where the pitiful collection of change still sits in the front pocket. She doesn't comment on it, just reaches into her wallet and pulls out her MetroCard, pressing it into my palm.

"Just take it. I'll grab a cab with Vaughn."

"Are you sure?"

She snorts. "Yeah, because I *love* the subway at midnight." She shoulders her dance bag and gives me a pointed look. "Text me when you get home, please."

Vaughn stretches dramatically, slinging an arm around Naomi's shoulders as he leads her toward the door. "My chariot awaits, milady." He sticks a cigarette between his lips, making Naomi squint.

"You light that thing anywhere near me and I'm going to knee you in the balls."

"Don't threaten me with a good time, girl."

The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

Brooklyn is still sitting on the bench, one leg tucked under her, absentmindedly running a finger over the edge of her pointe shoe ribbon. The tension in her body from the exhausting rehearsal has shifted to something else.

She doesn't look at me when she finally speaks.

“You ever think about how much this actually costs us?”

I frown as I throw my gingery-red hair into a messy bun. “What? Ballet?”

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. “Not just ballet. This life. The work, all the training, the barely-there paycheck.” She glances at me, one brow lifting. “We kill ourselves every day for what? The honor of being underpaid and having a career that's over before it's even begun?”

Brooklyn’s like me: making her dance dream work on her own. No safety net.

I don’t answer right away. Truth is, I have thought about it. Every single time I pull together enough cash for rent but not groceries. Every time I ache all over but know I’ll still be back at the barre the next morning.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Look, I understand pride, Lyra. And I’m not going to insult you by asking if you want a loan or anything. But…” The corners of her lips curl as she reaches into her bag.

My jaw drops as she pulls out a *gangster*-sized wad of cash.

“If you *do* need money…”

I blink at the thick stack of crisp hundreds, folded neatly. More cash than I’ve seen in…ever.

“What the fuck, Brooklyn?”

She smirks. “Relax. I didn’t rob a bank.”

I tear my gaze away from the money, forcing my voice to stay level. “Then where…?”

She exhales slowly. “Remember that charity thing where we did that excerpt from *Giselle* last month?”

Occasionally, mostly because it *always* results in new benefactors with deep pockets, select members of the company will perform at things like the Policemen's Ball or other charity events.

Brooklyn clears her throat. "Well, after we were done, this guy came up to me and said he had a dance gig I might be interested in. He said he couldn't tell me much about it, but that it paid insanely well. And… I took it. That's where this money came from."

A strange prickle works its way down my spine.

Brooklyn must notice the change on my face, because she quickly shakes her head. "Look, it's not stripping or anything. No one touches you—no one even speaks to you. And you're wearing clothes. But it pays way better than this." She gestures vaguely around us at the dressing room. "It's also secret."

The word makes something inside me tighten.

Secret is never good. Secret always comes at a price.

"What do you mean, *secret*?"

Brooklyn twists the ends of her hoodie strings around her finger. "It's like a private club or something. They pick you up at a location they decide, blindfold you, and drive you there."

My jaw drops.

"Are you fucking serious? Brooklyn, that's super sketch!"

She huffs a quiet laugh. "Yeah, I thought so too, at first."

I narrow my eyes. "*At first*?"

She shrugs. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought. You change in a dressing room, where the blindfold comes off. There were six other girls—all dancers.”

“And then?”

Brooklyn exhales, her voice quieter now. “They give us fresh blindfolds, masks, and earbuds that play music synced with a voice directing us. Someone took us all out to a performance space, and—we danced.”

I don’t like how that makes my skin prickle.

“For how many people?”

She shakes her head. “No idea. I never saw them. Never heard them. But they were there, I could feel it.”

I swallow thickly.

What the fuck.

She holds up the wad of money, her brow cocking significantly. “Lyra, they pay five fucking grand for *four hours*.”

My stomach lurches.

Five. Thousand. Dollars.

That’s rent, food, security. That’s a way out from the hole my mother seems to be completely hellbent on in digging us into.

Brooklyn watches me carefully. “Listen… again, I get pride, Lyra. But I saw you counting coins…” She lifts her shoulders. “They said they might be looking for more dancers. So if you wanted…”

I shiver, feeling the invitation linger between us like a lit fuse. I swallow, eying the money in her hand.

“Look, for now…” She hands me two twenties. “Will you just take a cab home? Seriously, the subway is dangerous this late. Please? And if you’re interested in the job… Here's the number for my contact.” She finds an entry on her phone and texts it to me.

Pride wants me to refuse the money politely.

Common sense and the prospect of spending hours underground with my fingers wrapped around my keys wins out.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, taking the money. “Seriously, thank you. I’ll pay you back.”

* * *

The night air is crisp, biting at my skin as I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

“Wanna just share my Uber?” Brooklyn nods at the car waiting at the top of the alley behind the theater.

I exhale. “Maybe, actually.” I shoot her a wry smile. “I feel like you’re pampering me tonight.”

She giggles. “I mean, *yeah*. You’re my girl. C’mon.”

I start to follow her. When I slip my hand into my hoodie pocket, I groan.

“Shit.”

Brooklyn glances back. “What’s up?”

My face droops. “I left my phone in the dressing room.” I shake my head. “You know what? Go ahead. You already gave me money for a cab. I’ll just do that.”

She frowns. “Don’t be silly. I’ll wait for you.”

“Nah, go get your ride. It’s late. But thanks. And…for earlier.”

“Anytime, girl. See you tomorrow for more Russian gulag conditioning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I groan.

I watch as she tugs her coat around herself, scampers up the alley, and slips into the waiting vehicle, red taillights disappearing into the night.

The door hisses shut behind me as I duck back into the warmth of the dim, silent ballet theater. My steps are quick as I make my way toward the dressing room.

It only takes a minute to find my phone and I stuff it into my hoodie pocket, shaking my head before slipping back outside.

This time, the door clicks shut behind me with finality.

The street is mostly empty now, the occasional honk of a distant car the only sound. The alley behind the Mercury splits halfway up to the street: continuing straight puts you onto Madison Avenue, which runs one-way north: perfect for Brooklyn, who lives up toward Harlem. But if I take the left-handed side-cut out of the alley, it’ll dump me on East 49th Street, where it's easier to get a cab going *downtown*, to the apartment I, unfortunately, share with my mother in Hell's Kitchen.

I ignore the creepy sensation that being here at midnight always brings as I hustle up the alley. I’m just about to turn the corner and head out to East 49th when I hear voices.

Low. Rough. Male.

I freeze.

The words are hushed, but I can still hear them. A weird shiver ripples up my spine as I do.

“What are you doing here? Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.”

The first voice is rough-sounding, deep, and somewhat frightening, with a dangerous edge to it.

My stomach knots at Bianca’s name.

Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.

Bianca as in Bianca Barone—well, Bianca *Drakos* now that she’s married—who's in the Zakharova with me. She’s an *incredible* dancer, super sweet, and is the youngest daughter in the Barone Italian mafia family.

I suck in a breath, pressing my back against the brick wall, forcing myself deeper into the shadows.

“No shit. I’m not here for her,” a second man growls. “What are *you* doing here, you psycho?” His voice is deep and dark, too, but also edged in something savage and viciously alluring, like a blade dragging down my spine or a dark promise whispered in my ear.

The first guy exhales sharply, irritated. “It was stupid and reckless for Matteo to hire her.”

My pulse hammers.

Her who?

“She dances *here*,” the first guy growls. “She’s friends with people like your sister. She could talk—”

“She was blindfolded, you dumb fuck,” the second man snaps. “And just what was your plan, exactly?”

The first man huffs out a breath. “I was just going to scare her a little,” he rumbles. “Remind her that the money she was paid ensures silence.”

Something inside me goes cold as things fall into place. I’m pretty sure they’re talking about *Brooklyn.*

The second man’s voice sharpens. “Stay the fuck away from where my sister dances, understand?”

There’s a tense, prolonged pause.

“Fine.” A slow exhale, like a forced truce.

“Is that a *yes* fine, or an *I’m blowing smoke up your ass* fine.”

“It’s a yes fine, calm down,” the first guy grunts. “Anyway, in unrelated news, Mushkin hasn’t responded to our summons.”

The second guy—the one with authority in his voice, the one who's driving the conversation—lets out a dark chuckle. “People rarely actually respond to a Black Court summons.”

I shrink further against the wall.

“They respond in behavior, at least,” the first guy mutters. “Mushkin hasn’t hired more security, fled, moved money. None of it. His schedule is still clear for the night of the trial, though.”

“You know how it is,” the second guy says, his voice smoother now. “Sometimes they’re so confident that they show up willingly.”

The first guy laughs, low and dark. “And if not…” He pauses, amusement dripping from his voice. “Then we get the fun of hunting them down before we even get to the chase.”

A slow shiver slides down my spine.

“Reach out to The Wolf and The Stag,” the second man orders. “Let them know the status on Mushkin. The Black Court will meet as planned.”

The Wolf? The Stag?

The *Black Court*?

Nothing about this conversation makes sense.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. They’re splitting up. I panic, pressing myself deeper into the shadows, willing my body to melt into the cold brick.

Then I flinch, freezing in place as a figure rounds the corner and suddenly looms over me.

Tall. Menacing. Powerful.

Suddenly, I’m looking straight into the cold, piercing blue eyes of Carmine Barone.

My stomach drops.

I’ve seen him before—either dropping off or picking up Bianca, or sometimes at performances or some of those charity events. But this is different.

Up close, he’s even more intense than he is at a distance. This near, he radiates raw power—and something darker, coiled beneath the surface, waiting to strike like a lethal, venomous snake. He’s wearing a dark suit and an open pea-coat, molded to his broad shoulders and powerful arms like a suit of armor.

It’s like black lightning striking from the shadows. Before I can even blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat, his fingers wrapping around it and

settling against my jugular. It’s not a choke—just a warning. A display of his strength. His power.

His control.

My breath catches.

“I—I didn’t hear anything,” I whisper, the words tumbling out too fast, too desperate.

His grip tightens slightly but he says nothing for a moment, those cold blue eyes piercing into me like knives, as if he’s flaying open my very soul to peer inside and feast on what he finds.

His thumb traces over my pulse. “No one asked you about anything you may or may not have heard.”

A tremor ripples through my body, my eyes widening even further.

“Who *are* you?” he finally murmurs darkly, his voice low, focused, and almost sensual in the way it teases over my skin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my throat works against his hand.

“N-nobody,” I whisper again. “I’m nobody.”

Carmine’s lips curl, something between a smirk and a snarl.

“Nobody…” he muses.

His grip lingers, his fingers still firm around my throat, pressing just enough that I can feel the subtle pressure against my pulse. A test. A game.

A reminder that he could crush me if he wanted to.

His thumb moves slightly, stroking the base of my throat like he’s considering something. My skin burns where he touches me, body locked in

place, muscles coiled tight. I don’t flinch. I don’t dare.

His head tilts, studying me like I’m something strange and unexpected.

“What did you hear?” His voice is a low rasp.

I shake my head as much as his grip allows. “Nothing,” I breathe.

Carmine hums, unconvinced. “Nothing?”

I gulp. “I-I was just leaving the theater. I didn’t—I wasn’t paying attention.”

His grip tightens for a second, just enough to make my pulse spike against his hand before he eases up again. “Funny,” he murmurs. “People who’ve heard nothing don’t usually look this scared.”

I open my mouth, then close it again, forcing my breathing to stay even. He’s testing me, waiting to see if I’ll break.

I can’t do that.

Men like him eat weakness for breakfast.

My fingers clench into fists at my sides. “You… You startled me, is all.”

“If this is *startled*, I’d love to see what it looks like when you’re *truly* scared.”

He says it like a desire. Like he’s already thinking about getting off to the idea of my fear.

Carmine watches me for a beat longer. Then, finally, he lets go. I suck in a breath, my skin prickling where his hand was on my throat, the ghost of his touch lingering like a brand.

He takes a slow step back, his sharp blue gaze never leaving mine.

“Well, Miss Nobody who heard nothing,” he murmurs, his lips curling into an amused and cruel almost-smile. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he’s gone, and the alley is silent once more.

The air feels heavy, charged, like the ghost of him is still standing there, watching me.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe.

Then my legs finally unlock and I’m able to stumble forward, pulse still hammering, his words pressing heavily on my spine and dragging over my skin like hot knives.

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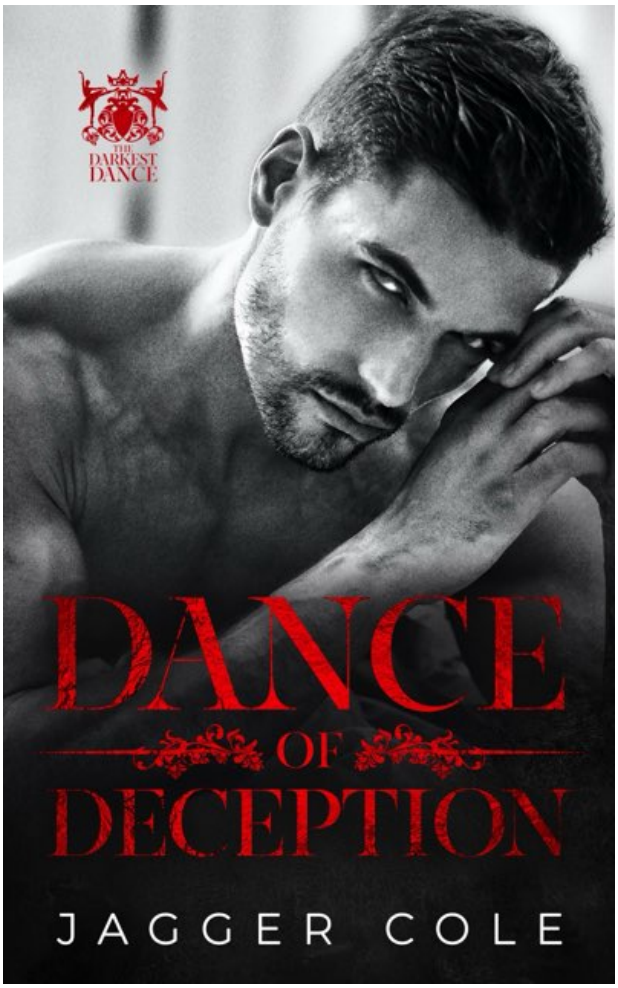

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* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
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